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"THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE IN LITERATURE BY AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN"

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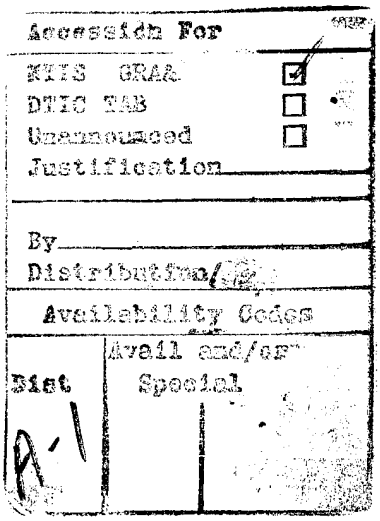

ABSTRACT

African-American women's literature has earned considerable recognition since the 1970's, due in large part to the critical acclaim and popular success of authors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Terry McMillan. With that attention has come a wave of criticism attacking the literature as anti-male, due to persistently negative portrayals of African-American male characters. This analysis determines the nature of the trend in negative images of the black male and the validity of the criticism by examining numerous works by Morrison, McMillan, and Walker, along with the writing of several other authors in the genre. The significance of this study to both art and society lies in the fact that the application of a stereotypical label to a genre can prevent an audience from reading the literature with an open mind. The powerful artistic value of African-American women's writing and the lessons it can teach in cultural and human understanding will therefore be preserved.

KEYWORDS

African-American Literature
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature provides insight into life. Its tales are wholly or partially fictitious; but its premises are concepts, emotions, and experiences which are real and recognizable to readers. Narrative literature is generally classified into genres based on subject matter such as science fiction, romance, and historical fiction. As the racial diversity of America asserts itself in literature, however, sub-genres based on certain cultures emerge. An example is African-American women's literature, the topic of this study.

African-American women's literature has become a genre unto itself because among its comprising works can be found common themes and characteristics. Mary Helen Washington writes in her essay "The Darkened Eye Restored: Notes Toward a Literary History of Black Women,"

> If there is a single distinguishing feature of the literature of black women. . .it is this: their literature is about black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black in America look very different from what men have written. (35)

Aspects of the works such as topics of concentration and plot vary considerably, but all of the writing conveys ideas from and about the African-American woman's perspective. Literature included in this genre offers an opportunity for the reader to better understand the attitudes and experiences of black women in America. These works, through a literary, vicarious experience, provide access to a specific and unique American heritage; they are a cultural gift and treasure.

Moreover, these authors share these stories eloquently. Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison, Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker, and bestseller Terry McMillan all tell tales and offer moral lessons with artistry.

These works can function as a window into the mind and perspective of the African-American woman. Selwyn Cudjoe summarizes such a purpose in her essay entitled "Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement":

> Autobiography and fiction, then, are merely different means of arriving at the same truth: the reality of American life and the position of the Afro-American subject in that life. Neither genre should be given a privileged position in our literary history and each should be judged on its ability to speak honestly and perceptively about Black experience in this land. (8)

This is a significant statement: it says that records of what is true and tales of what may be true carry equal weight in accurately describing and conveying the African-American perspective. Therefore, black women's fiction is a way of teaching the history of black women's experience.

Because of the critical acclaim of African-American women's literature, these works are being read widely-- both in the classroom and by the public at large. With such significant exposure, however, comes an inherent risk. These works should not be pre-judged or stereotyped in such a manner as to limit the reader's opportunity to learn from the wisdom of experience expressed on the pages. One particular area that has already opened itself to such stereotyping is that of the image of African-American males in works by African-

American women. Some critics contend that black males have been "bashed" by the authors, meaning that the writers' portrayal of fictional black males signifies a negative stereotyping of their real counterparts. One such critic is black male author Charles Johnson, who once said of African-American women's literature:

> Some of the portraits of black men in those books are so limited and so one-profiled. . . that they don't seem moral to me. It's not just [Alice] Walker. You could also talk about [Toni] Morrison. . .You basically see black men who are fuck-ups. . .But how does that tap into the general negative images we have of black males? . . Where, finally, are the images of human beings who black and male and lead responsible lives? (Little, 175)

Edward M. Jackson, an Associate Professor of English and African-American Studies at Delaware State College, wrote a short book entitled Images of Black Men in Black Women Writers 1950-1990. In his study, he mentions the negativity of the descriptions of black males, citing as examples male characters created by Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, and Maya Angelou. Jackson writes: "Positive images of black males are the exception, rather than the rule" (22). Jackson also discusses the ideas of Ishmael Reed, who "began to criticize black women writers as early as 1982" (77). Reed states:

> In the works of Toni Morrison, Gayle Jones, Ntozake Shange and Alice Walker, black men are spoiled narcissistic brutes who have the same unconscious hostility toward women as any other American mama's boy. (Reed qtd in Jackson 77)

Authors Terry McMillan and Alice Walker have both been accused of male-bashing by critics of McMillan's Waiting to Exhale and

Walker's The Color Purple; Ishmael Reed "directs his most vitriolic comments toward Alice Walker's The Color Purple" (Jackson 77). Generalizations about anti-male attitudes throughout the genre have come up in various written pieces, such as newspaper and magazine articles about black female authors and their works; as well as in classroom discussions (the topic came up regularly in a course on African-American women's literature taught at the United States Naval Academy).

These criticisms are debated by the authors and some readers. Terry McMillan, in a personal interview, says: "I mean, I got accused of this male-bashing thing, and I was like, wait a minute now!" She continues, "I wouldn't like to think that I bring a negative, preconceived agenda to my work and I don't think a lot of African-American women writers do." Alice Walker also addresses the application of the term "male-bashing" to her writing. "In an article in Ebony magazine (May 1992). . .Walker added, 'there is nothing in my work that would ever support a hatred of Black men or Black people'" (Jackson 82). Walker is also "dismayed by the reaction and misinterpretation that Mister [from The Color Purple] was a composite of all Black men...." (Jackson 82) Her statement explains that one particular character in a book is not necessarily representative of an entire demographic group; and if a character is incorrectly perceived in that light, the purpose of the character and perhaps the entire piece may be misconstrued.

Author/critic Michelle Wallace argues with Reed specifically, claiming that the reason Reed believes black women are vilifying men is that he "doesn't relish the idea of a black woman making public judgments about black men..." (Wallace qtd in Jackson 80). She suggests that the criticisms stem from a personal reaction to seeing negative ideas about black males put in print by black females. Edward Jackson, in his analysis of black women's writing, does not offer support for the labeling of the works in the genre as "male-bashing." He writes, "In some ways, particularly in the case of Morrison and Walker, [black female authors] seem to express sympathy with the black male characters although they depict them negatively" (Jackson 83). A final example of the responses to the "male-bashing" criticism is a statement by film director Spike Lee which was printed on the dust jacket of Terry McMillan's Waiting to Exhale (1992):

> No doubt when this book is published, the author will hear once again--as Ntozake Shange did for For Colored Girls, Alice Walker for The Color Purple, and Gloria Naylor for The Women of Brewster Place--the cries that the Black man has been wronged, the Black man has been dogged. I disagree: Terry McMillan has crafted a well-written, truthful, and funny story of four African-American women--four 'sistuhs' who are trying to make it in this world we all live in--and the sometimes volatile world of Black female-Black male relationships.

The questions that must be considered when judging the validity of evaluations of the works as anti-male are these: are black males indeed generally put in a negative light; and, if so, is the purpose or the result of such portrayal to malign the entire gender, to "bash" the African-American male

both in fiction and in fact?

In reading literature that offers the opportunity to learn about and even immerse oneself into a subculture that is highly influential in American society, careless or defensive interpretations of the work absolutely defeats its secondary educational purpose and unfairly compromises its primary function as art. If a reader believes African-American women's literature is anti-male, without personally and thoroughly testing the premise, that reader may avoid the works entirely or may read the works selectively, anticipating evidence of this trend. Either way is a loss; the reader may miss the truths and artistic elements of the works in his hunt for anti-male expressions, or will miss the overall experience of a singular and special genre as a result of pre-emptive stereotyping.

Before a sustained analysis of the characterization of black males in black women's literature, some background information about the reasons black women began writing prolifically in the late 1960's and early 1970's may be useful. The purpose behind black women's literature may illuminate the purposes behind trends in the characterization of the black male in these writings.

During the 1960's and 1970's, both the civil rights/racial equality movements and the feminist/gender equality movement developed forcefully. In less than two short decades, America saw enormous changes in previously

accepted roles for both African-Americans and women; perhaps the most important change was that these subordinate roles imposed by dominant society (mainly white male) were no longer accepted.

Following the commencement of the various civil rights movements were analyses of the reasons behind the push for social reform. These interpretations of the actions of different elements of society explained the specific wishes of numerous interest groups. Toni Cade Bambara, in the preface to her anthology The Black Woman, explained where black women fit:

> When the experts (white or Black, male) turn their attention to the Black woman, the reports get murky, for they usually clump the men and women together and focus so heavily on what white people have done to the psyches of Blacks, that what Blacks have done to and for themselves is overlooked, and what distinguishes the men from the women is forgotten. (8)

To the black woman, it appeared that her specific needs and interests had been eclipsed by the needs of the entire black community; and to all outsiders, it seemed that there were no black women. Their voices were silent.

Two decades after Bambara's collection was published, Mary Helen Washington connected the continued stifling of the black woman in political expression to a similar trend in literature:

> Why is the fugitive slave, the fiery orator, the political activist, the abolitionist always represented as a black man? How does the heroic voice and heroic image of the black woman get suppressed in a culture that depended on her

> heroism for its survival? What we have to recognize is that the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power, not justice, and that power has always been in the hands of men--mostly white but some black. Women are the disinherited. Our "ritual journeys," our "articulate voices," our "symbolic spaces" are rarely the same as men's. Those differences and the assumption that those differences make women inherently inferior, plus the appropriation by men of the power to define tradition, account women's absence from our written records. ("Darkened Eye" 32)

Black women recognized the glaring gaps in written descriptions of their perspective, and hoped to make themselves heard. Some attempted to become part of the general feminist movement, dominated by white females, but they found that "in the whole bibliography of feminist literature, literature immediately and directly relevant to [black women] wouldn't fill a page" (Bambara 10). Toni Cade Bambara found that "Oddly enough, it is necessary to point out what should be obvious-- Black women are individuals too" (9). Black women found their individal and collective voices in fiction by reviving earlier works written by black women and by writing their own pieces. Selwyn Cudjoe described dramatically the effect of the black women's decision to establish a place for their works in literary history: "the Afro-American woman remained an all-pending absence until she was rescued by the literary activity of her Black sisters in the latter part of the twentieth century" (6). Authors rediscovered in the rescue were Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote primarily in the 1930's; Frances Harper, poet and author of a

novel published in 1890; and Gwendolyn Brooks, who won the Pulitzer Prize for her poetry in 1950 and wrote a novel thereafter. These women are only a few names on the list of authors whom black women sought to revive in the conscious literary mind. This revitalization of earlier works inspired many black women to write; notably including Alice Walker, who first brought Zora Neale Hurston into the forefront of black literature and then wrote several of her own works which showed Hurston's influence.

This generation of black women was very aware of the situation of black women's literature when they began to write and publish their work and that of others. Toni Cade Bambara solicited works from numerous black women in order to create her anthology, The Black Woman, published in 1970. This collection sought to describe as many issues affecting black women as possible, either in fiction or essays. Bambara's work was an organized effort to gain a public hearing for the artistic expression of black women's concerns. Numerous other authors began to write more as they sensed the demand for books that related specifically to themselves as a group.

Retrospectively, one can understand how such authors, in writing to fully express the views of black women, could have viewed and portrayed black men as part of the problems they encountered. The women felt that black men did not acknowledge the gender struggles within their own race. If black women felt completely neglected and misunderstood by

their own men, how could they define them in fiction as supportive partners? Describing antagonistic relationships between black men and women would definitely show how different the two genders were. Also, black women were trying to find their niche in the feminist movement; feminist literature often shows males as oppressors, and such an agenda in black women's literature could also create negative impressions of the black male. But black women authors never forgot that, as a race, all black people had a common struggle to gain equal treatment under the laws both written and unwritten. Alienating themselves completely from black males would limit the potential for unity behind the civil rights movement, for raising families, for supporting each other in the experience of being black in America. As Fran Sanders writes in her essay entitled "Dear Black Man:"

> I am a woman and you are a man and I have always known it. If you love me, tell me so. Don't approach me as you would an enemy. I am on your side and always have been. We have survived, and we may just be able to teach the world a lesson. (79)

The goal expressed in black women authors' work is a mutually understanding, mutually respectful relationship between black males and females. Battles between the genders only weaken their ability to stand together as black Americans. African-American women authors usually do not appear to be trying to drive a wedge between men and women; rather, they try to foster empathy by showing how black women feel in various relationships and situations, and what they perceive are the

reasons behind certain patterns of behavior of black males. Close examination of literature in the genre supports these statements, and indicate that African-American women authors are perhaps less militant and harsh toward males than their white feminist counterparts.

Alice Walker's concept of womanism establishes a significant difference between the style of feminism asserted by the white women's movement and the ideas expressed in black women's works. Walker describes herself as womanist rather than feminist. Relative to womanism, feminism might be defined as a reactionary and political movement; feminists try to prove they are as capable as males in fields once closed to women, and that they deserve equal opportunities under the law. To paraphrase Walker, womanism is almost spiritual; womanists accept and promote what is uniquely female and what is uniquely male. Walker, quoted in an article by Mary Margaret Richards, explains that a womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Richards 339). The movement is not a response to men; instead, it pushes women to have pride in themselves and recognize their abilities to contribute to society. Womanism is not a race to "catch up" to men, nor is it opposed to men. Walker's fiction evidences these ideas; several other authors express similar thoughts. In general, African-American women authors do not subscribe to degrading men in order to make women appear admirable; nor do they show women as victims in

order to make the black males seem a menace. The apparently negative characterizations of black men describe how a black male may be, not how he must be.

In creating their male characters, black women authors deal with several issues. They do use the males to reflect women's concerns, such as abuse of women by men, but they try to explain male behavior in order to understand it themselves and to explain the reasons to the audience. Contrarily, the male characters sometimes offer the female characters an opportunity to grow and become more sure of themselves as black women. The women may be rejecting their established roles in society through their interactions with males. Characters may illustrate the theory that when both men and women develop together, they create a strong and joyous union. An objective reader can recognize the purpose male characters serve as that reader judges the reason for a negative portrayal of black men. The qualities the men accent in the women are sometimes far more important to the story than the traits of the men themselves. Determining whether the author is concentrating on black males, females, or both equally is critical to understanding the characterization of the black male in each work. A negative image does not necessarily mean the author is trying to lead the reader to judge black men negatively. Although it can be tempting to believe this because of the feminist roots of the works and the fact that certain negative qualities are repeated in numerous pieces by

different authors, a discerning reader will not rush to the decision.

The exact nature of the common negative traits will become obvious through the analysis of several examples of literature in this genre. Generally, the males show a tendency to lash out at black women when they feel inferior or humiliated by their experiences with white people; to blame all of their troubles on white society, even when they have an opportunity to have a positive influence on their own satisfaction; and to avoid responsibility for their families, their happiness, and their self-images. Black women accepted the role of mute martyr for years; as Fran Sanders explains in 1970, "It is almost right and reasonable that the people who loved him most, his women and children, would have to bear the brunt of his frustrations" (76). The authors studied here assert that this is no longer acceptable or desirable; they and all black women must be free to speak and to be heard. The fact of black women writing at all supports the new black female voice; the recurrent theme and the skill and eloquence of its expression address an ever more receptive audience.

The entire scope of African-American women's literature is vast. Since the interest in black male character portrayal is relatively modern, this study focuses on fictional works published since 1970. Literature by renowned authors Toni Morrison, Terry McMillan, and Alice Walker are studied thoroughly, because their writing spans the 1970's, 1980's and

1990's; and because their names are likely to be familiar to the average reader. Short stories and novels by other, lesser-known authors are examined; as well as novels by some of the newest and most recently published authors.

The first part of the analysis focuses on works written from the perspective of the black male, and the second part involves numerous pieces written mainly from a black female perspective. African-American women's literature provides speech from a group long silent; in order to appreciate and learn from this genre, the reader must take care not to classify any part of it without thorough examination. This study is intended to offer the necessary analysis to determine the purposes for and the effect of the trends in characterization of black males by black female authors. The examination attempts to determine whether, how, and why the alleged negative characterization of black males reveals a desire of the black female authors to adversely impact the reputation of "real-life" black men.

II. MEN'S PERSPECTIVE, WOMEN'S WORDS

Alice Walker, Terry McMillan, and Toni Morrison each wrote novels which tell tales from a black male's perspective. These novels provide valuable insight into the image of the black male in fiction written by their female creators because they present information as the black male characters perceive it, with annotations and different viewpoints expressed by the narrator or other characters. Each of these "men's works" traces the personal development of one or more central male figures through a variety of experiences; the changes in the men's self-images are ultimately apparent in the new ideas and attitudes they describe as their stories progress.

Each of the books in this category is unique, but there are some significant common threads. The male characters are introduced with a sense of self that is not conducive to productive relationships with others, especially with women. Their actions tend to isolate them from others and trap them within a painful and confused self-image. They feel that their lives are completely beyond their control; they are merely mindless beasts who are manipulated by various elements of society. As a result, they neither feel nor show any responsibility for themselves. These broken men often discover that the only way they can feel powerful is to lash out at someone beneath them...such as the African-American women in their lives.

The influences which inspire these behavior patterns vary

somewhat; but the major cause appears to be the negative experience of a black man surviving in white society, with a secondary cause being attitudes taught in the family. The novels are very clear on how and why the males establish their ideas, so the reader can see and even identify with the reasons for these outlooks on issues such as themselves, their work, and their women.

The novels trace the main characters' experiences over time, and then all three show the tedious, but ultimately glorious, ways in which the men revolutionize their thoughts. The males find a measure of satisfaction in their present selves, as well as hope for the future. They also begin to tentatively reclaim their lives; they gradually try not to accept their inability to control certain aspects of their lives as license to abandon responsibility in all areas. This growth usually takes place with some help from a woman, be she family memeber or lover. The method of counterbalancing the male perspective with influential female characters starkly clarifies the differences in attitudes between the black men and women; such a juxtaposition makes the specific male traits more obvious. By extension, this technique also serves to make the men's negative qualities apparent. This could be perceived as anti-male; but the complete and detailed character portraits empathetically describe the reasons for the males' actions, as well as covering their inherent virtues, which are what allow them to change and outgrow poor

behavior.

In all three works, the male's thoughts are treated with respect and sympathetic understanding; the male voice is presented, and it is allowed to speak clearly and without interference, rather than being drowned out by another dominant speaker. The authors have created characters who all have considerable room for growth in basically the same areas. The direction in which they develop is held up as ideal (or, at least, an improvement over their former selves). McMillan, Morrison, and Walker all show faith in the black male through their stories written from a black male perspective. Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland describes perhaps the most carefully detailed metamorphosis of the three books, but the central figure's developments are somewhat characteristic of those of other black male characters. McMillan's Disappearing Acts and Morrison's Song of Solomon will also be studied, and their themes will be related to those presented so thoroughly in The Third Life of Grange Copeland.

Published in 1970, The Third Life of Grange Copeland was Walker's first novel. The story traces the Copeland family through three generations, from the 1920's to the 1960's. It is told in the third person, by a narrator who emphasizes the viewpoints of Grange Copeland and his son Brownfield. Neither man feels his life is worthwhile or even his own to live, and both respond to their sense of defeat with cruelty to their wives and families. However, the title character finally

changes his thinking and behavior as a result of his time with his granddaughter, Ruth. The Third Life of Grange Copeland receives special attention in this analysis because it provides an extremely detailed image of an African-American male, and it addresses many of the issues that are presented in other novels of the same genre. A thorough understanding of the concepts and conclusions described in Walker's novel will provide a solid basis for recognizing trends in the ways in which other authors portray the black male .

Grange Copeland, although not technically a slave, is bound by the white male-ruled sharecropping system. He works at the beck and call of his boss; he is trapped in permanent debt, and his dreams of autonomy appear beyond realization. To survive in the workplace, he separates himself from his emotions in order to continue obediently picking cotton Brownfield accompanies his father to the fields from toddlerhood, and his observations express Grange's appearance:

> For when the truck came his father's face froze into an unnaturally bland mask, curious and unsettling to see. It was as if his father became a stone or a robot. A grim stillness settled over his eyes and he became an object, a cipher, something that moved in tense jerks if it moved at all. (Walker, Copeland 8)

As young Brownfield observes the fieldworkers, he notices that "their looks were a combination of small sly smiles and cowed, embarrassed desperation." (Walker, Copeland 8) Walker's depiction of Grange and his fellow cotton pickers indicates not only their intimidated silence, but their hot shame. His

father's willingness to submit to the white boss confuses Brownfield; he is uncomfortable with the way an overweight white man can make tall, muscular Grange avert his eyes and accept orders.

Brownfield witnesses his father's powerlessness at home, as well. Their small house needs repairs, Margaret needs clothes, Brownfield should attend school. Grange faces the list of demands that he once hoped he could satisfy. He "lifted his shoulders and let them fall. Brownfield knew this movement well; it was the fatal shrug." (Walker, Copeland 13-14) Grange expresses his resignation and helplessness with this unceremonious gesture. Critic W. Lawrence Hogue writes that there exists "an established definition of manhood--taking care of self and family-- that becomes the model for measuring the worth and value of the Afro-American male." (qtd in Winchell 45) If this statement is true, then Grange has proved a failure.

Grange handles (or, more appropriately, avoids handling) his humiliation by drinking and abusing his wife. In one of his recurrent drunken stupors, Grange stumbles on his frightened, mesmerized son and yells, "I ought to throw you down the goddamn well." (Walker, Copeland 9) He offers no further clarification; but, based on his misery, one can conclude that he is trying to protect Brownfield from a life like his own. After his periods of inebriated rage, Grange slips into a thick depression. At this point, Brownfield

hears "no anger or determination in his father's voice; there was only a rough drunken wistfulness and a weary tremor of pity and regret." (Walker, Copeland 10) As evidenced by the quoted passages, Brownfield has been raised (in the most flexible sense of the term) by a man whose dignity is repeatedly crushed at work, who is unable to improve living conditions for his family, who imagines killing his son in order to spare him a similar ordeal, and who must temporarily drown in a bottle in order to continue functioning.

Brownfield is impressed with the idea that he must escape his father's world. His fantasies reveal his wish to succeed where his father failed; he dreams of going up North and enjoying a healthy financial and family life. But his fantasies are pinched by his circumstances. His mother, who began sleeping with countless men upon realization that Grange would offer her no affection, gave birth to the fruit of one of her affairs. She herself could hardly bear to look at it, so she forced Brownfield to babysit regularly. As a result, he "harbored a deep resentment against his mother for making it so hard for him to dream." (Walker, Copeland 18) In Brownfield, the reader observes the roots of bitterness and the early curtailment of hope. The prime factors at this stage appear to be Brownfield's parents; his personal experiences have not yet given him reason to believe he cannot fulfill his own wishes.

Grange responds to the new baby by leaving Margaret and

blaming the dissolution of their marriage on her. He immediately moves in with Josie, the town whore. Margaret kills herself and the infant, and Brownfield takes the opportunity to disappear and try to start over.

After several years, Brownfield finds himself in virtually the same place he had been as a child. Without an education, he is unable to find any work besides sharecropping. But he has not lost all idealism; this is evidenced by the fact that he is able to fall in love with a local schoolteacher. Mem is gentle, patient, and educated. She teaches Brownfield to read and to speak properly, and he accepts the lessons without feeling inadequate. He is in awe of this woman: "Mem put some attention to what she was saying in it, and some warmth from her own self, and so much concern for the person she was speaking to that it made Brownfield want to cry." (Walker, Copeland 46) The neglect of his childhood is healed in Mem's concern for him. Brownfield envisions their future together, as does any man in love. "In his own mind, he considered himself perfect for her, if only because he loved her." (Walker, Copeland 46)

An unexpected facet of Brownfield's behavior must be acknowledged, in order to see that regardless of his feelings for Mem, there are already some quirks to his way of conducting an intimate relationship. Even after becoming involved with Mem, Brownfield is unable to be faithful. He sleeps with both Josie, the same woman his father had used

years before, and her daughter Jorene. These women are hard and cynical, and do not improve Brownfield's self-image; in fact, he knows they are using him and he feels like "an animal." (Walker, Copeland 47) Yet he considers himself powerless to avoid them. Why does he cheapen himself by betraying Mem? and why betray Mem for women who make him feel weak? The situation suggests that a part of Brownfield considers him not worthy of Mem or the future he envisions. This part of Brownfield is pressuring him to trap himself (in this case, with the domineering whores) and follow the pattern of his father's life.

Brownfield temporarily escapes Josie and Jolene. He marries Mem, and is happy and satisfied at home. When the workplace is discouraging, as it was for Grange, Mem "...sang to him when he crawled in weariness and dejection into the warm life-giving circle of her breast...he grew big and firm with love, and grew strong." (Walker, Copeland 49) The maternal imagery indicates that Brownfield is accepting nurturing from his wife, and his spirit is fortified by her. At this point he can accept comfort and affection; he still believes he will one day attain money and be able to extricate himself from the chains of sharecropping.

Several years pass, and Brownfield remains paralyzed. He has a five year old daughter who must accompany him to the fields: "His heart actually started to hurt him, like an ache in the bones, when he watched her swinging the mop..."

(Walker, Copeland 53) He is suffering the same pain Grange did, knowing his child's fate and being powerless to change it. Brownfield's hopes and perception of his capabilities deteriorate when he sees a young extension of himself slaving beside him: "That was the year he first saw his own life was becoming a repetition of his father's. He could not save his children from slavery; they did not even belong to him." (Walker, Copeland 54) His acknowledgement of his own helplessness is reiterated several times by Walker, and it is cited as the main reason for his future atrocious behavior. This connection reminds the reader that Brownfield's (and, similarly, Grange's) behavior is not caused by an integral character flaw, but by their choices in how to handle their external circumstances. These male characters are not programmed from birth to handle their struggles gracelessly, although many of them choose to do so. Their given natures do allow them to treat their loved ones kindly and graciously. The authors emphasize that a black male's thoughts and actions, like those of all people, are within his control. He is not destined to behave or speak in any particular manner. In reading beyond the scope of this novel, one notices that many black male characters make the same behavior choices as Brownfield and Grange in response to parallel situations.

If W. Lawrence Hogues is correct in his theory that providing for a family is the mark of a black male's success, then it is understandable that Brownfield is so despondent

about his perceived failure in this area: "He was never able to do more than exist on air; he was never able to build on it, and was never able to buy any land of his own; and was never able to set his woman up in style, which more than anything else he wanted to do." (Walker, Copeland 54) As suggested in this passage, Brownfield's inability to please his wife in the way he had imagined is a mark of a virtually worthless existence. His love for Mem is genuine, but Mem's thoughts on her living conditions are irrelevant to her husband. She is perfectly comfortable in their meager home, but Brownfield wanted to give her more. He has not disappointed Mem; but, he has deeply disappointed himself.

Once Brownfield reaches this mental state, a good relationship with Mem becomes impossible. He sees Mem as a constant reminder of his greatest failure, and therefore he switches from appreciation to incessant punishment. "Brownfield beat his lovely wife now, regularly, because it made him feel, briefly, good...trying to pin the blame for his failure on her by imprinting it on her face..." (Walker, Copeland 54)

Another dimension of Brownfield's changed attitude is that he cannot bear witnessing his wife's successes. Her intelligence and ability to teach that once left him wonderstruck, now infuriate him and further injure his pride: "His crushed pride, his battered ego, made him drag Mem away from schoolteaching. Her knowledge reflected badly on a

husband who could scarcely read and write." (Walker, Copeland 54) Her education is a threat and a constant humiliation to Brownfield.

Brownfield is unable to accept that he probably will not achieve his dreams, due primarily to financial restrictions somewhat beyond his control. He does not decide to find other elements of his life to be proud of, such as a loving relationship with his wife and children. He has failed himself in that he cannot get total control over his employment situation and his income, and therefore he finds that the rest of his life is not worth much effort.

Brownfield's character development supports the idea that his primary goal was to be able to care for a family. However, it is significant to recognize that Brownfield's definition of caring involves a considerable monetary element. The idea of cash and possessions being some of the critical earmarks of an African-American male's success is repeated in other works; this will be analyzed further. Being unable to "provide" according to his definition of the term, Brownfield is suffocated by fury. His only outlet is his abuse of Mem: "His rage could and did blame everything, everything, on her...His rage and anger and frustration ruled." (Walker, Copeland 54) Walker carefully describes Brownfield's feelings, indicating that these emotions and their effect on his actions are important to understanding the story.

Mem, unlike Grange's wife, remains faithful to Brownfield

despite his treatment of her. But Brownfield is so intent on being able to despise her that "he accused Men of being unfaithful to him, of being used by white men..." (Walker, Copeland 54) Perhaps this is also a way of projecting his own flaw onto Mem; Brownfield has not given so much as a thought of protest to his boss in years. Brownfield "was determined at times to treat [Mem] like a nigger whore, which he knew she was not..." (Walker, Copeland 54) Brownfield, unable to accept the truth of his own position, is now falsifying his image of Mem in order to punish her. If he continues to see her as she is, he will be forced to recognize her virtues. He needs the outlet for his anger more than he needs a good wife.

Although Brownfield thinks of his father, Grange, with bitterness, he is following exactly in the old man's path. Once his relationship with Mem deteriorates completely (by his choice), he returns to Josie, the woman with whom both he and his father have already had affairs. Something has changed, however:

> He was often unable, after Mem, to make love to Josie; the thought of Mem and her perpetual tired grayness shriveled him up. . .And sometimes, by pretending to believe something nasty about his wife, something low down enough to go home and beat her about, he could succeed in making love to Josie. (Walker, Copeland 63)

The author suggests that Brownfield is unable, deep inside himself, to believe that Mem deserves the treatment she is receiving. Perhaps the knowledge that he has intentionally brought her to this state makes it impossible for him to think

of her "grayness" without feeling his whole self cringe.

As instances displaying Brownfield's lack of power increase, his behavior becomes exponentially more vicious and cruel. He is forced to take a job working for a boss he dislikes, because his original boss so ordered. Brownfield entertains the fantasy- only for a moment-- of refusing the job, but he swallows and smiles and replies "Yassir." He returns home that evening with a renewed sense of worthlessness and a wish to see someone else suffering more pain and humiliation than he. Demonstrations of his state of mind include his laughing when his wife burns her hand while preparing dinner, and calling his daughter "stupid." (Walker, Copeland 81) He begins addressing Mem as "Ugly." (Walker, Copeland 84)

Mem insults Brownfield further by signing a lease on a new, nice house; an act he is in no position to perform for himself. Enraged, he bellows:

> We moving exactly when and where I say we're moving. Long as I'm supporting this fucking family we go where I says go. I may not be able to read and write, but I'm still the man that wears the pants in this outfit!
> (Walker, Copeland 87)

This statement seems to be a desperate clutch at security in masculinity. The working definition of manhood offered by Hogues is reiterated in the passage; Brownfield needs to believe he is supporting the family, and is therefore entitled to make all major decisions. He is especially bitter about the fact that Mem is able to hold a job that will allow her to

support the whole family at a level of comfort Brownfield could never give.

Mem, too, has undergone a series of changes since her marriage-- this topic will be examined in detail at another time. With respect to Brownfield, she has lost her fear and gained the will to satisfy herself and her children. When Brownfield refuses to move, Mem holds a gun to his testicles and explains in an ice-calm voice that the family will, in fact, be moving to the residence she has selected. She explains, "I have let you play man long enough to find out you ain't one." (Walker, Copeland 91) Brownfield whimpers, "Mem, baby, the white folks just don't let nobody feel like doing right!" (Walker, Copeland 94) Brownfield introduces another theme that is echoed in many of the novels under analysis: that of the white man as the castrating figure, responsible for all limitations of the black man. Brownfield feels powerless over his own life because it is, in the workplace, dominated by white men who are not looking out for the best interests of their employees. With this statement, Brownfield has openly admitted that he does not accept responsibility for his circumstances or his manner of coping with them. Brownfield's experiences with his bosses have indicated that the attempts of a black man to escape the lifestyle that his race and level of education dictate is virtually impossible. The white men that he encounters on a daily basis do not afford him respect. However, Brownfield has allowed his

encounters with racism and a stagnant job to excuse even the aspects of his life that he can control-- such as the way he treats his family, and the way he handles the fact that, unlike himself, his wife has knowledge and experience that is marketable in areas other than sharecropping or sitting at home.

In the new house, Brownfield "was in a rage against his own contentment." (Walker, Copeland 102) Mem's working frees Brownfield to work an easier job, and the house has luxuries he has never experienced.

> If he had done any of it himself, if he had insisted on the move, he might not have resisted the comfort. . .As it was, he could not seem to give up his bitterness against his wife, who had proved herself smarter, more resourceful, than he. . .secretly savoring thoughts of how his wife would 'come down' when he placed her once more in a shack. (Walker, Copeland 103)

Even his youngest daughter, Ruth, recognizes his frustration and part of the underlying cause. She catches him trying to read: "When Brownfield saw her, he threw the book at her...In the first grade, she knew envy when she saw it." (Walker, Copeland 118) Brownfield's capabilities do not even equal those of a grade school girl; he is described as "too deformed for any work except that done to and for animals." (Walker, Copeland 83) He has so long believed he has nothing to offer, that all he can do now is destroy the small pleasures others have established. His shame has rotted into hopeless fury.

Brownfield's chosen revenge uses Mem's most basic female qualities against her-- he keeps her pregnant. Childbearing

weakens her body. She cannot keep her job or her health, and she finally dies of illness. Brownfield has proven, at least to himself, that he is a man and Mem was an inferior woman to her death. Soon after she is gone, however, Brownfield expresses a profound hopelessness: "He longed for a now over-and-done-with lushness. His time of plenty, when he could provide. . .Plumpness and freedom from the land, from cows and skinniness, went all together in his mind...." (Walker, Copeland 161) He may have ridded himself of a wife who threatened his stunted pride, but his own life is as empty and without future as always. Brownfield soon finds himself in prison.

Brownfield represents an extreme case of the black male mentality that is established in a variety of novels by black women. Not only is he unable to tolerate the success of and contributions from his wife, but he plots misery for himself and his family in order to punish Mem (and perhaps himself?) for her abilities and his failures.

At this stage in the novel, Grange again becomes a focus of the story. His reintroduction to the Copeland family constitutes his "third life;" the first one having been his original attempt at establishing a family and the second his escape from the same. Grange is utterly rejected by Brownfield, yet he becomes a significant influence on his son's family as a result of circumstances and his own perseverance. Grange's attitudes have changed considerably

since he abandoned his first life, and they continue to metamorphose as he observes his son.

The character development of these two central figures proceeds simultaneously, but diverges considerably. The author allows the reader to easily compare the differences between the two men in action and attitude, and through narrator's supplements and tone she suggests which of the two men is the better role model.

When Grange first reenters Brownfield's world, he is unstable and unsure of how to proceed. At first he takes up with Josie, but finally decides that he would prefer to devote his energies to his granddaughter Ruth. Grange treats Josie with contempt once Ruth becomes his favorite; this suggests that Grange still does not quite know how to treat people, especially his lovers, properly. However, his concern for Ruth indicates that he wants to be supportive of his extended family, as he was not with his immediate relations. Grange becomes depressed when he witnesses the knot of sorrow his son has created where a family should have been. He wants to help Ruth, but he is afraid of somehow pushing her away: "He would curse himself for being the father of his son and in danger of being thought just like him by his son's daughter." (Walker, Copeland 136) However, although Ruth does not always agree with Grange or understand him, his behavior toward her clearly distinguishes him from Brownfield.

In describing the reformed Grange, Walker does not

pretend that certain realities, such as racism, are insignificant. Grange maintains the views he has always had of white people, based on his experiences with them. The difference between his old attitude and his new one is that he is now able to both resist the oppression of the white people and cope with situations in which he is relatively powerless, without venting frustration on his family. Grange's story is one of reclaiming personal power; of maintaining a sturdy self in the face of all external pressures.

As addressed in Brownfield's case, the issue of how a black man handles his apparently subservient position to the white majority is critical to his success or failure in domestic and personal life. Grange learns to articulate his feelings about racism, and he also analyzes the ways in which his feelings may have affected his actions with his original family. When he starts caring for Ruth, he loathes all white people. Ruth is confused by his vehemence, but the narrator explains his ideas: "He had discovered, as Ruth must, that innocence and naivete are worthless assets in a wilderness, as strong teeth and claws are not." (Walker, Copeland 143) This passage acknowledges the hardships of Grange's existence, as Ruth's questioning acknowledges the changing attitudes of society.

The extent of Grange's anger is described in a scene set in a park. A white woman is drowning in a lake; Grange offers his hand to save her, but she spits "nigger" at him as an

epithet and dies rather than accept his help. Grange feels that, in a sense, he murdered her. "He believed that, against his will, he had stumbled on the necessary act that black men must commit to regain, or to manufacture, their manhood, their self-respect. They must kill their oppressors." (Walker, Copeland 153) Grange is searching for a way to rebuild his self-esteem, but he is focusing on violence against white people as the optimum way of achieving this task. The narrator questions the thoughts of himself, and all black males: "But did they dare learn why they had no love for themselves and only anger for their children? They did not." (Walker, Copeland 154) The author is suggesting, through the narrator, that Grange has more to accomplish in his quest for self-love.

After further reflection, Grange states to Ruth:

> There was a time when I didn't own my own life and then there was a time I didn't care if I lost it, long as I took a dozen or so white folks with me. . .and the Lord or something dropped you in my lap. A voice said to me, you stop that cuttin' up, Nig, here is a reason to get yourself together and hold on." (Walker, Copeland 206)

Grange is shaking his preoccupation with revenge on an uninterested white population. He is focusing instead on the joys of caring for people who need him--such as Margaret and Brownfield did once, and Ruth does now.

Grange, in a powerful speech, gives Ruth a comprehensive explanation of what he has learned from watching himself and his son, and what he has accepted as a solution to the

problems he sees. The passage is lengthy, but it is extremely valuable in defining the attitude that many of the black male characters created by black women lack. Whether or not they have learned what Grange has is critical to their portrayal in novels of this genre:

> Your daddy's done taught me something I didn't know about blame and guilt. You see, I figured he could blame a good part of his life on me; I didn't offer him no directions, and, he thought, no love. But when he became a man himself, with his own opportunity to righten the wrong I done him by being good to his own children, he had a chance to become a real man, a daddy in his own right. That was the time he should of just forgot about what I done to him--and to his ma. But he messed up with his children, his wife, and his home, and never yet blamed hisself. And never blaming hisself done made him weak. He no longer have to think beyond me and the white folks to get to the root of all his problems. . .I mean, the crackers could make me run away from my wife, but where was the man in me that let me sneak off, never telling her nothing about where I was going, never telling her I forgave her, never telling her how wrong I was myself? And the white folks could have forced me to believe fucking a hundred strumpets was a sign of my manhood, but where was the man in me that let me take Josie here for such a cheap and low-down ride, when I didn't never care whether she lived or died, so long as she did what I told her....(Walker, Copeland 206-7)

Grange believes that blaming others for every aspect of one's life is useless and fosters character weakness. He understands that racism and upbringing can have a serious negative impact on an individual; but that person must at some point take his life in his hands, and his alone. Brownfield knew that he did not want to be like his father; yet he allowed it, even forced it, to happen. Grange sees that a sense of personal responsibility can overcome victimization by

family and society. Manhood is inside a person, inherent in his character and not his circumstances. In this way, one can achieve self-respect and inner strength regardless of external pressures. Grange's realization is mirrored in the development of several other black male characters, to the benefit of themselves and those close to them.

Brownfield, while in prison, also has time to reflect. Thinking of Mem, "it struck him suddenly that Mem had actually succeeded in teaching him to read and write and that somehow he had not only forgotten those days with her but had also forgotten what she'd taught him." (Walker, Copeland 164-5) The thought seems to have some sense of nostalgia and regret. The other awareness Brownfield achieves is that:

> He had a great fear of being alone. He thought he could understand better than any of the other prisoners why God had created the universe when He found himself alone, and fixed it so man had two warm arms and a tongue. (Walker, Copeland 165)

When Brownfield is released, he wants custody of Ruth so he can have another human life nearby. His attraction stems not from love, but from the need to possess in a material sense; to his daughter, he states: "You belong to me, just like my chickens or my hogs. . .a man's got to have something of his own!" (Walker, Copeland 219) These lines show that Brownfield has not grown out of the belief that dominance over another human and possession of any object or creature are indicative of masculinity. He has not gained Grange's understanding of manhood being primarily internal.

Grange tries to explain to his son what he has learned from bitter experience: "We both of us jumped our responsibility and without facing up to at least some of his wrong a man loses his muscle." He continues: ". . .most of what I'm sayin' is you got to hold a tight place in you where they can't come. . .We keep killing ourselves for peoples that don't even mean nothing to us." (Walker, Copeland 208)

He also shares his new ideas on his wife and the way their relationship should have been:

> If I had my life to live over, your ma and me would maybe have starved to death in some cracker's gutter, but she would have died with me holding her hand! For that much I believe I could have done--and I believe she would have seen the man in me. (Walker, Copeland 208)

His repeated lessons to Brownfield suggest that he is trying to teach his son from his mistakes, but Brownfield is far too bitter to accept the advice. Grange's son does not have Grange's appreciation for women as supportive humans--he considers them possessions and burdens. As an excuse, he cries: "I would have took care of my own, had the white folks let me!" (Walker, Copeland 219) To Brownfield, still, all power remains outside of his grasp, tied up in white men and in money he does not have.

But Grange has changed. He has learned. He cares for Ruth with love and concern until his death. And he accepts full responsibility for the poor choices he had made as a younger man. The novel is the story of Grange Copeland, and the reader is impressed with his ability to face himself and

revamp his perspective on his existence. The author shows faith in black males by allowing Grange to change and redefine masculinity for himself. Grange, also, expresses the hope of the novel: "What I know, and I reckon the most I know is that people change. That is the main reason not to give up on them." (Walker, Copeland 195)

Terry McMillan's Disappearing Acts, published in 1989, is her second novel. It tells the intertwined stories of Franklin and Zora, who live in Brooklyn in the 1980's. The narrator alternates between Franklin and Zora, so the reader sees the perspectives of both genders on the relationship. In describing the growth of the couple's involvement, the story details the marked character changes Franklin undergoes. Franklin, at various stages in the novel, shares the attitudes of both Grange and Brownfield Copeland from Walker's book. He ultimately finds an approach to life and love that allows him to create a strong relationship with Zora; this differs from Grange, who was too late in overhauling his outlook to save his marriage. Franklin and the Copeland men have some common problems with society, relationships, and self-esteem; these similarities will become obvious in the examination of Franklin's story. Disappearing Acts also suggests which attitudes and actions lead to success with women by showing how Franklin and Zora achieve a steady relationship; as Third Life did by describing Grange and Ruth's positive experience as a "family."

Franklin opens the novel by stating firmly, "All I can say is this. I'm tired of women." (McMillan, Acts 1) He is planning a retreat from a series of affairs and a failed marriage in order to improve himself. He did not attend college, but he speaks well and is naturally intelligent and interested in his surroundings. Franklin works construction and does woodwork as a hobby; he enjoys the satisfaction of building with his hands. He is proud of his physique and works out at a gym three days a week. He is optimistic and ambitious; he just needs some time to organize his life:

> I've got definite plans for my life. They ain't crystal clear to me right now, but that's why I'm working on my constitution. A man needs one. Needs to get his priorities straight. . .Can't nothin' make your life work if you ain't the architect. (McMillan, Acts 5)

Franklin seems to have a fairly strong sense of himself, and wants to take control of his future.

Zora Banks enters his life when she moves to Brooklyn. After a chance meeting outside her apartment building, he helps her move in. They have a pleasant conversation, and each is impressed by the other's personality and wit. They begin seeing each other regularly. After making love for the first time, Zora becomes nervous about his level of commitment. Franklin reassures her: "I know the difference between good sex and a good woman, baby." (McMillan, Acts 64) He is sincere in his appreciation of and respect for Zora, shown by his thoughts while relaxing in his tiny apartment after leaving Zora:

> Sometimes life can be sweet as hell. All that shit about being by myself until I got my constitution together went up in smoke. I mean, the plan is the same, the rules just changed. Hell, when you meet a woman who likes you 'cause you you, not because of how much money you bring home...tells you she wants to be in your corner a hundred percent and means it; asks you about your dreams....(McMillan, Acts 67)

A critical part of the relationship for Franklin is that he can share his hopes with Zora. He was raised in a home dominated by his selfish, bitter mother. His father never spoke up in defense of himself or anyone else, and Franklin hates his father's weakness. Franklin himself is subjected to his mother's abusive cynicism when he tries to tell her his plans to one day run his own business: "Takes a lot of money to start a business, Franklin...You gon' be forty before you know it, and talking about starting some business. Who you think gon' lend you that kind of money, is what I want to know." (McMillan, Acts 102) Like Brownfield Copeland, Franklin is used to having his hopes crushed by his mother. Zora, on the other hand, hears him out and promises to help him in any way she can. To Franklin, her attitude is a gift.

Months pass, and Franklin is unable to get a steady job. He goes to organizations such as "A Dream Deferred," which specializes in placing blacks and Hispanics on construction sites requiring a quota of thirty percent minority workers. These assignments sometimes last only days, and he is frustrated because many sites are filling their minority requirements with illegal aliens. Franklin thinks, "This is

the kinda shit that makes you wanna kill somebody-- 'cause you powerless." (McMillan, Acts 104) Without a college degree, he cannot become an entrepreneur, and without money for classes, he cannot get a degree. Also, Franklin is unable to contribute to rent or food for Zora's apartment, which he now shares. He, like Brownfield, is feeling financial pressures because he is in an apparently unchangeable work situation.

His depression about his stagnancy is exacerbated by Zora's success:

> Hell, any way I look at it, her future is planted in cement.
> But look at her man.
> I had to do something, but what?..I just started walking down side streets, one after another, but this wasn't getting it, so I stopped in a liquor store and bought myself half a pint of Jack Daniel's. (McMillan, Acts 105)

Franklin begins drinking more regularly and heavily. He is less able to appreciate Zora, because he is struggling to swallow her victories with his failures. When she tells him she might audition to sing with a band, a step toward realizing one of her oldest dreams, he shows no interest; "I was excited for Zora, but I just couldn't drum up the enthusiasm. My shit was dragging like a motherfucker, and hers looked like it was about to move up the fuckin' ladder." (McMillan, Acts 112)

Franklin has started a decline similar to the ones Grange and Brownfield experienced. He is disappointed in his own life, ashamed of his inability to contribute financially to his living situation, and bitter about his girlfriend's

achievements because they accent his ineptitudes. Predictably, his relationship with Zora begins suffering. On her birthday, Franklin is upset with himself because he has not been working (despite his efforts to find a job), and he cannot treat her the way he had hoped. He is too humiliated to tell Zora his situation. As a result, he is sullen and unpleasant all evening; Zora thinks, "He had ruined my damn birthday, and I still had no idea why." (McMillan, Acts 118) The final insult comes when Franklin tries to hail a cab for them. A few empty cabs pulled over, but pulled away just as quickly. Zora observes: "He had the most humiliated look on his face--one I'd never seen before--and after five or six minutes of the same thing, he looked like he was ready to explode." (McMillan, Acts 118) When Zora tries to hail a cab, one pulls over immediately. When the couple gets in, Franklin spits, "If you big and black in America, that's two strikes against you--did you know that, Zora? They think all black men is killers and robbers and that we gon' to cut their throats, then take all their fuckin' money." (McMillan, Acts 119) Zora is embarrassed by his behavior, and the two do not speak for the duration of the night. The fact is, Franklin is definitely the victim of racism. Nothing he can do will change the fact that he is a physically imposing black male, and that he is stereotypically feared by a significant part of society. What Zora objects to is the way that he handles himself in the situation. He cannot always control his

circumstances, but he can control the way he reacts to them; this is the same lesson that Grange Copeland learned.

Zora later finds out, from one of Franklin's friends, that Franklin has not been working. Jimmy explained the root of Franklin's concerns to Zora:

> All he was worried about was you and your rent. What you was gon' to think--that he wasn't shit. That you was gon' realize you was too good for him. A man shouldn't love no woman as much as he love you, but then again, you ain't all that bad looking." (McMillan, Acts 120)

Franklin's fears of being unable to provide for Zora echo the idea expressed in The Third Life of Grange Copeland that a male's success lies in his ability to financially support his family.

Franklin continues waiting in long lines for a few days' work, and working to exhaustion when he can get jobs. He thinks toward Zora: "Yeah, you can sing about disappointment, baby, but I'm the one standing knee-deep in it, and I'm sinking by the day. I wish I could tell you that, but all I got left is my pride." (McMillan, Acts 152) That pride erodes quickly. Franklin quits exercising, having lost interest in his body and virtually everything except alcohol. Zora tries to encourage him, to tell him the rough time will pass, to promise him they can survive together. Franklin, however, believes he is isolated from Zora, as shown in this conversation:

> "You couldn't possibly understand, baby," he said.
> "Why not?"
> "Because you ain't a black man."

(McMillan, Acts 178)

Perhaps he feels he has accepted so much from Zora, he can no longer take even her emotional support. He is separating himself, as Brownfield and Grange did in a more extreme manner, and the subsequent lack of communication makes a strong relationship impossible.

Franklin is, at times, a very giving and considerate person. The reader is reminded of these elements of his character by certain actions: for example, he nurses Zora when she is ill, and he looks after his sister Darlene after a suicide attempt. He cares about people close to him, and he wants to help them. The fundamentally good parts of Franklin's nature must be recognized, because they are what offer hope for his development into a self-assured man who is capable of maintaining an intimate relationship. Franklin's positive qualities may sometimes seem eclipsed by his ugly actions; but the reader must be able to see where his assets gleam through the shadows, in order to keep faith in his potential.

Over the next several months, Franklin endures various emotional highs and lows. Some days he is optimistic, eager to work, planning ways to break out of the cycle of debt in which he lives. Other days he is depressed or simply uninterested in improving his situation and becoming self-sufficient. Franklin gets a steady, well-paying job for a while, which helps both his self-esteem and the relationship

enormously. He works long days and overtime every night in order to bring home a substantial paycheck for him and Zora; clearly, he is a dedicated worker when given the opportunity. Franklin is excited, and he hastily moves them to larger apartment so he can finally start living the way he has hoped. Shortly after the move, Zora realizes she is pregnant. She has already aborted one of their pregnancies (and two others, before Franklin). This time, Franklin begs her to keep the child. He leaves her a note: "I want us to be a family." (McMillan, Acts 255) Zora loves him and knows she wants to have his child; she is just unsure of the timing. She ultimately decides to have the baby. Franklin's reaction to her decision shows the depth of his tenderness:

> He smiled and his dimples dug into his cheeks. Not saying a word, he walked over and put his hand on my belly and made circles. Then he put his arms around me and pulled me in. His warm lips pressed against my cheek, and then pulled away and stroked my hair. His eyes were glassy, but he wasn't crying. He bent his head down and put his lips against my ear. "Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you." (McMillan, Acts 257)

Despite minor annoyances with each other, Franklin and Zora are doing well as a couple. Franklin takes Zora to Saratoga for a weekend music festival, and it starts out pleasantly. One afternoon, Zora is browsing in sidewalk shops, and Franklin gets irritated. The old bitterness rises, and Franklin thinks angrily: "She just had to whip out one of her credit cards. To make me look like I couldn't afford to buy what she wanted." (McMillan, Acts 271) Although he tries to

relax, he finds himself criticizing Zora constantly for no reason he can articulate. He drinks heavily with dinner, and buys a fifth of liquor to carry with him--a sure sign that he is feeling discouraged.

At the concert that evening, Franklin figures out why he is upset:

> All of a sudden, I realized that I wasn't married to this woman, that here she was carrying my baby, another woman controlling my destiny--again--an I was trying to figure out how I talked her into this shit in the first place. I didn't want no more kids. She tricked me into this shit. . .I betcha she had this shit all planned.
> (McMillan, Acts 275)

Franklin feels he has lost control of his life--this time to a woman, not to the white majority--and he deals with his claustrophobia by being harsh to Zora. Unthinking, he says out loud, "These young girls is getting finer by the year." (McMillan, Acts 275) Zora snaps back that he should go get one, and Franklin leaves her.

After wandering around drinking for a while, Franklin tries to find Zora again. He is perplexed by his own behavior. When he is unable to find her, however, he gets angry and feels victimized again. He finally runs into her at the cab stand. Sharp words are exchanged, and Franklin finishes by saying:

> I paid all this goddamn money for these tickets. . .You the one who fucked it up. . .Even that baby was your big fuckin' idea. Well, I'll tell you what. I'm tired of you telling me what to do. . .don't look for me tonight, 'cause I'm gon' get me some unpregnant snapping pussy, some good pussy, from somebody who wants to give it up at

night!" (McMillan, Acts 276)

Franklin has lost all sense of responsibility; he believes his life is somehow being done to him, and he has never had a choice. He chooses not to accept the fact that he did want a baby, because acknowledging this truth would leave no easy exit.

He returns to their hotel room, still feeling slighted but no longer angry. He tells Zora: "Look, I wanna say I'm sorry, but I ain't, at least not yet. Just let me have some pussy...." (McMillan, Acts 278) She refuses, and asks him how he would feel if he thought she was gazing at younger men. He responds, "They wouldn't be looking at you, 'cause you fat and pregnant." Zora retorts, "Well, fuck you, too."(McMillan, Acts 278) He slaps her hard across the face. She throws a lamp at him. He approaches her, and then stops, sits down, cries. He promises he won't touch her again. Zora is suspicious and upset, and she asks him to leave. He does, without argument. When she calls him back in, he apologizes profusely and promises to stop drinking. From this point on, the weekend is pleasant.

This scene is significant in the novel because it is perhaps the worst fight they have had, and it is safe to say that it is primarily Franklin's fault. Franklin has not progressed to Brownfield's state of finding satisfaction in being abusive; his slapping Zora seems almost mindless and reflexive. Franklin takes an important turn after this scene.

He sees where his behavior can lead, and he does not like himself when he is violent with Zora. He never hits Zora again. Franklin chooses to try to regain control of himself, at least in his relationship with his girlfriend. This is what Grange Copeland had to do in order to be successful in a close relationship, and Franklin's similar realization leads to an improved involvement with Zora. However, it takes a few more ugly incidents for Franklin to take the lesson to heart.

Another crucial hurdle that must be overcome is the way Franklin responds to financial and job problems. He gets laid off again, despite his hard work. He spends his time sitting in Zora's apartment all day, eating and watching television. He does not put much effort into finding work; he thinks, "All I knew was that I was tired of repeating myself and getting no-damn-where. After a while, a man gets worn out, beaten down, and you ain't got nothing left." (McMillan, Acts 297) He becomes critical of Zora for reasons not apparent to her. The cycle has started again: job and money troubles lead to self-esteem problems which in turn lead to interpersonal upheavals. After Zora tells him she needs him to contribute in some way to their living situation, he starts cleaning and making himself useful around the apartment, and becomes more serious about pursuing work. He is trying to be sensitive to Zora's needs; he just tends to be self-absorbed at times.

When Zora gives birth to their son Jeremiah, Franklin is proud and happy. However, he soon becomes jealous of the baby

and frustrated that he is not making money to support the family. He is too ashamed to take care of the baby while Zora is working, because he believes that his being at home makes him worthless. He loses a job because he injures himself while drunk at a construction site. Again, he feels "lost." (McMillan, Acts 333) Again, he takes out his confusion on Zora, this time in a virtual rape:

> "I want some pussy, and you gon' give me some tonight whether you want to or not."
> "Oh, so you're going to rape me, is that it?"
> "I guess so." (McMillan, Acts 336)

After this, the relationship seems over. Franklin tells Zora he is leaving, and Zora wants him to go. But Franklin knows himself well enough to be able to articulate the reasons for his departure; his needs are very similar to those that Grange and Brownfield Copeland tried to satisfy by abandoning or harming their wives. The cumulative effect of the repeated cycle of disappointment and shame have taken an enormous toll on Franklin. He thinks:

> It ain't that I don't love Zora no more. It ain't that at all. I just done disappeared. I don't know who the fuck I am no more. And that pisses me off. I'm taking it out on her, I can see that. (McMillan, Acts 339)

Despite the fact that he understands why he has had so much trouble in the relationship, he is still full of rage. He tears the apartment apart before he leaves.

This deep anger is characteristic of many fictional black males; in the cases of Franklin, Grange, and Brownfield, who are representative of numerous black male characters, the fury

seems rooted in a diminished sense of self and purpose. The black male rage and the character's choices in handling it contribute to a negative image of black men. However, the authors show the circumstances behind the black male characters' attitudes, as well as showing some of them reflecting on their own behavior and trying to change it. These elements of the character portraits inspire the reader to understand and even support the black males; such aspects of characterization do not imply "male-bashing."

After leaving Zora, Franklin goes through a period of anger and self-pity, but ultimately faces himself and comes up with a plan to change his life:

> Number one, I was gon' have to cut out all this fuckin' drinking. Number two, I was going back to school. And number three, even though I missed Zora and my son already, I wasn't gon' show my face over there until I felt strong enough to say I was sorry.
> It took three months. (McMillan, Acts 358)

Franklin now does what he intended to do at the beginning of the novel; he solidifies his constitution. He finds pleasure in woodworking and bodybuilding, and is working hard in school. He determines that he "used every woman [he] ever had, trying to get them to make up for what [his] Moms never gave [him]." (McMillan, Acts 364) The story ends hopefully, with his first visit to Zora in months. She is planning on moving from the area, and he is still not ready to reenter the relationship, but their love has survived and the reader is left believing the couple may ultimately reunite.

What the novel emphasizes about Franklin's character is that he needed to take control of his own life and stop being a willful victim. He had been hurt by his mother, but he needed to stop excusing his bad behavior for that reason. Although he knows that his mother had not given him what he needed, he recognizes that he had chosen to punish others as a result and he could stop such actions. He also seems to let go of the idea that he is constantly under persecution by the white man, and he finds a way to advance his knowledge and job skills. He may encounter racism, but he is trying his best to become as qualified as possible in order to be successful (as Zora was). In an interview, McMillan stated about Franklin's development:

> I really like Franklin in Disappearing Acts, with a few exceptions. . .I liked who he started out being, and who he ended up becoming, but how he got there was kind of rough. But what I appreciated about him was his struggle. . .a man who at least is involved in a struggle and is cognizant of it, I have to give him credit....

The concept of finding peace with oneself, regardless of external circumstances, is reiterated frequently in the novels of this genre. It is a critical theme in the works previously analyzed because it allows interpersonal relationships to develop. In Disappearing Acts, family appeared to be the most significant influence; in Copeland, racism was the more significant factor in the way the men developed. But both family and societal racism are part of both books; and their effects on black male characters are significant because they

are identified by the authors as the roots of personal and relationship struggles.

Toni Morrison's third novel, Song of Solomon, was published in 1977. The story describes a young black man's search for control of his destiny, told from his point of view. The primary influence on the central character's life appears to be his immediate family, consisting of mother, father, and sisters. This work does not go into as much detail about romantic relationships or the racism/financial struggle connection as the other two books analyzed previously, but these topics are part of the setting. As in Walker's and McMillan's novels, however, Song of Solomon's main character becomes better able to relate closely to others after gaining power over himself and his responses.

Morrison's male characters are extremely materialistic and image-oriented; this is a tendency that was discussed with less emphasis by the authors in the other two books. In Song of Solomon, young Milkman Dead is taught by his father Macon to acquire possessions (including women). This example illustrates two key points in the novel: the significance of wealth as a sign of manhood and self-sufficiency to the black male, and the way attitudes are perpetuated through families.

Macon Dead, as a young man, saw money as a means of clearing a path to a respectable future marked by accepted status symbols. In pursuing a doctor's daughter, he thought about his keyring: ". . .to entertain thoughts of marrying the

doctor's daughter was possible because each key represented a house which he owned at the time." (Morrison, Solomon 22) Because he had some valuable items behind his name, he felt "worthy" of marrying Dr. Foster's daughter. His confidence is anchored in ownership. When he is in an unfamiliar part of town, he feels like a "propertyless, landless wanderer." (Morrison, Solomon 27) Many years after marrying Ruth and having children, Macon flaunts his purchases to feel self-satisfied. He takes the entire family for car rides which "had become rituals and were much too important for Macon to enjoy. For him it was a way to satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man." (Morrison, Solomon 31)

Macon did not have much time for his son. He was somewhat disgusted by Ruth's unflagging adoration of Milkman, and he avoided his son's company as a result. On one of the few occasions when Macon shared thought with Milkman, he offered his idea of the best approach to life: "Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things...Then you'll own yourself and other people too." (Morrison, Solomon 55) In Macon's mind, financial strength is equivalent to the power to reign over one's own life. This is especially reminiscent of Franklin's and Brownfield's desire for money: they wanted funds to support families, but Macon is more interested in being able to control his future and those of others. Macon's lust for autonomy is more power-based than the similar desires of

Franklin and Brownfield, but it states again the connection in the black male character mind between wealth and empowerment. Milkman grows to possess elements of both the thirst for dominance and the craving for cash.

As previously mentioned, Song of Solomon emphasizes the significance of a family's influence on an individual--another topic discussed in The Third Life of Grange Copeland and Disappearing Acts. Throughout the novel, the reader is aware of how both Macon's and Milkman's upbringing influence their adult lives. Many of the decisions they make can be connected to experiences they had when they were younger.

As a boy, Milkman was frightened of his father and confused by his mother. Macon Dead was an intimidating man whose presence created a cold fear in his son. He was shamelessly ambitious and concerned about his image and reputation. His reasons for this focus are, in fact, founded in an incident in his childhood. When Macon was young, his illiterate father had been tricked into signing away his land. Unwilling to surrender his property, the older man had sat on the fence with a shotgun for days, until he was finally killed. Macon remembers vividly "the numbness that had settled on him when he saw the man he loved and admired fall off the fence...." (Morrison, Solomon 50) Macon does not want his son ever to experience that feeling. He explains to Milkman his belief that if he owns as much as possible, he will never be humiliated by being shot off a fence. Macon's

reasoning does not change the fact that he is more absorbed in possessing than parenting. It does, however show the reader that Macon is not a heartless megalomaniac. He believes he is doing what is necessary to preserve himself and, to an extent, his family.

As a direct result, Milkman grows up believing that money is the passport to personal freedom. Perhaps there is a measure of truth in this statement, but money is not an absolute prerequisite for making choices for oneself. Milkman becomes absorbed in plots to earn cash so he can leave his parents and, most important, be his own person:

> I just know that I want to live my own life. I don't want to be my old man's office boy no more. And as long as I'm in this place I will be. Unless I have my own money.
> (Morrison, Solomon 223)

From Macon's stories of his early childhood, Milkman extracts the idea that there is gold near Macon's and Pilate's old home (which they had fled as children). He embarks on a search for this rumored treasure:

> The fact was he wanted the gold because it was gold and he wanted to own it. Free. As he had sat chomping on hamburgers in the bus station, imagining what going home would be like now--not only to have to say there was no gold, but also to know he was trapped there....
> (Morrison, Solomon 260)

This passage provides an excellent example of the way family influences a person's thought process. Milkman is struggling to develop himself as a complete individual- this is the major issue in his life. He has been taught by his father that

money equals power. Therefore, he attacks his dilemma by using the approach drilled into him by his father. Although in many situations Milkman actively resists following the path his father chose, in some cases his learned response is reflexive. This passage is particularly significant because it shows how the idea of the incredible importance of wealth can be perpetuated through the generations of a family. All of the central black male characters in the three novels connect money with personal freedom and a sense of a unique, empowered self; to the point where virtually nothing else in life has a higher value. Song of Solomon indicates clearly that this idea is passed down through the ages of black men. In Morrison's novel, the concept is ultimately rejected by Milkman, but this is a result of his experiences away from the ideas about money with which he was raised. The pervasiveness of the obsession with wealth is a result not only of circumstances, but of the example black males establish for each other.

Another perspective to which Macon exposes his family is his bitterness toward the women in his home: "His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash...." (Morrison, Solomon 10) Macon tells his son the story of his relationship with Ruth in an attempt to justify his feelings and actions. He says "I can't tell you I was in love with her. . .The important thing, when you took

a wife, was that the two of you agreed on what was important." (Morrison, Solomon 70) Ruth was a doctor's daughter; Macon envisioned her as the type of woman he wanted to build a life with. The trouble started when he realized that Ruth was unable to separate herself from her father; he was always the most important figure in her world, even after his death. Macon became repulsed by his wife, and this governed his treatment of her forever.

Macon's universal distrust of all women was developed when he was much younger; he believes his sister Pilate betrayed him when they were children, alone and fending for themselves. The chain of events is complicated, but the critical factor is that Macon thinks (without proof, but with suspicion) that his sister cheated him. The end result of Macon's experiences with women is that as a middle-aged man he can barely tolerate them. Macon passes on to his son a heightened awareness of the women in his life; Milkman appreciates the impact a woman could have on his world. He is wary of them, even as he is attracted to them, and tries to keep them in perspective and not allow them to dominate his thoughts.

When Milkman first encounters Pilate, her daughter, and her granddaughter, he is washed in powerful sensations which he had never expected, based on his father's attitude toward all women and Pilate especially: "He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who

seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud. . .No wonder his father was afraid of them." (Morrison, Solomon 47) Milkman now agrees with his father that the overwhelming emotions that can be evoked by women are so strong as to be frightening; such a belief leads to fear of serious involvement and fear of losing control of oneself while in a relationship. Milkman's attempt to maintain a distance from women is implied in the creed he develops:

> Dominion won by fear and secured by fear was still sweeter than any that could be got another way. (Except for women, whom [men] liked to win with charm and keep with indifference.)
> (Morrison, Solomon 178)

This quote is mainly about Milkman's method of gaining power over others, but it also describes his idea of relating to women. The fact that the sentence is in parentheses adds to the sense that women are peripheral in Milkman's life, as they were in his father's.

The following passage shows a direct connection between Milkman's relationship experiences and his upbringing:

> He hated the acridness in his mother's and father's relationship, the conviction of righteousness they each held on to with both hands. And his efforts to ignore it, transcend it, seemed to work only when he spent his days looking for whatever was light-hearted and without grave consequences. He avoided commitment and strong feelings, and shied away from decisions. (Morrison, Solomon 181)

Milkman's family was so unattractive to him that he fears any commitment that could bind him into the same position as his parents. The involvement most likely to pose such a threat is marriage; therefore, Milkman balks at the idea of spending his

life with someone. When Milkman tries to make a change in his parents' interactions, he is defeated by his family's silent refusal to deviate from the status quo. Macon had tried to hit Ruth, infuriated by a prissy comment she had made. Milkman held his father back: "You touch her again, one more time, and I'll kill you." (Morrison, Solomon 67) The men share a moment of confused feelings of shame and pride, and then Milkman is absorbed in happiness. But when he asks his mother if she is alright, she looks down at her hands. "Now when he met his sister's eyes over the table, they returned him a look of hatred so fresh...." (Morrison, Solomon 68) Milkman watches their disapproving faces and comes to a discouraging realization:

> Quickly he left the room, realizing there was no one to thank him--or abuse him. His action was alone. It would change nothing between his parents. It would change nothing inside them. (Morrison, Solomon 68)

The knowledge that his actions are both ineffectual and irrelevant--worthy of neither praise nor punishment-- pushes Milkman to question his role in his own life. He does not want to be like his parents; but if he is unable to affect them at all, can he create himself the way he would like to be? Incidents such as this lead Milkman to decide he must escape his home to become a person with whom he is satisfied.

Milkman's family has endowed him with several of the characteristics which seem typical for the black men described in all three novels analyzed. Certainly his attitude toward

possessions (money and status symbols are critical to personal satisfaction) and relationships (commitment is difficult and can lead to repeat performances of an unpleasant childhood) were instilled to a significant degree by his upbringing. As suggested earlier, the fact that these feelings are passed on in families further explains their prevalence in black male characters. The novel emphasizes the importance of family traditions and lessons shared in the home. It shows that attitudes (especially those which are apparently common in black male figures) can be developed not only through personal experience, but through a type of gradual inheritance. This idea is significant because it shows that in some cases a males's negative qualities do not suggest that he is a bad person at the core. He may have been taught the attitude or behavior since birth, and he must overcome years of learning by observation in order to change. The authors, by implying that negative behaviors may have been learned and not born into the men, suggest that the males can learn otherwise and change. This implication does not unfairly criticize or "bash" the black men. Of course, beliefs perpetuated in families are not unique to the African-American culture. The fact that numerous African-American women authors choose to address similar issues in their male characters suggests that there are particular attitudes to which black people are regularly exposed in their households; such as the overwhelming importance of money and status

symbols, or the role of black woman as martyr and black male as tormentor when he needs the release. These long-established customs are being questioned openly by the authors, who represent the desire of the black female population to redefine their needs and position in society.

Understanding Milkman's background and the environment in which he matured helps the reader recognize what issues Milkman is handling when he begins his search for "himself". This self-discovery theme, common to Song of Solomon, Disappearing Acts, and The Third Life of Grange Copeland, manifests itself as a pursuit of personal freedom, often begun as an attempt to escape responsibility. Milkman is less vocal about his concerns with escaping the chains of racism, although the subject is mentioned, than he is about breaking free from the pressures imposed on him by his family and girlfriend. His personal journey, like Grange's and Franklin's, leads him to a completely new concept of the people who share his life; this revolution in attitude will be examined briefly.

Milkman is capable of love and concern for others, and he desires connection to those around him. He does not start to isolate himself until he is feeling smothered. An example of his warmer side is his feelings toward Hagar and her family (Pilate and Reba). What he appreciates about Pilate's clan is their differences from his mother:

> Not that Pilate or Reba felt the possessive love for him that his mother did, but they had accepted

> him without question and with all the ease in the world. They took him seriously too. Asked him questions and thought all his responses to things were important enough to laugh at or quarrel with him about. (Morrison, Solomon 79)

Milkman feels that these women have an interest in him as a person, not merely a fixation with him. He likes being treated in this manner.

Milkman's first love is Pilate's granddaughter, Hagar. He is smitten from the moment he sees her: "But Milkman had no need to see her face; he had already fallen in love with her behind." (Morrison, Solomon 43) At the time of their first meeting, he was twelve and she was seventeen. His adoration of Hagar endured for a while, showing his boyish romantic idealism: ". . .he was grateful just to see her do anything or be any way." (Morrison, Solomon 92) They share an off-and-on involvement for years. Milkman's attachment to Hagar becomes more grounded in reality, but he continues to enjoy her company and is used to having her around. He begins to rethink the relationship, though, when she is thirty-six and he is five years younger; Hagar is finally needing a deeper commitment, and Milkman is not certain he can supply it: "Milkman had stretched his carefree boyhood out for thirty-one years. . .[Hagar] placed duty squarely in the middle of their relationship; he tried to think of a way out." (Morrison, Solomon 98)

As mentioned previously, Milkman senses that he has little control over his destiny. His frustration at his lack

of self and independent actions leads him to feel confined by any interpersonal relationship that makes demands on his time and decisions. This behavior pattern was also obvious in Disappearing Acts and The Third Life of Grange Copeland; when a man feels he has no self, any attempt to influence him or choose for him is treated as a threat. It is virtually impossible to maintain a beneficial relationship with this mindset. Milkman thinks, "Deep down in that pocket where his heart hid, he felt used. Somehow everybody was using him for something or as something." (Morrison, Solomon 165) This passage is reminiscent of the victim mentality mentioned in the two novels previously discussed- a person's belief that the population of the world is taking advantage of him.

There is a subtle racial element to Milkman's feeling he is being used; as was also present (more overtly) in Walker's and McMillan's works. He sits around with his "gang" discussing the topic:

> The men began to tell tales of atrocities, first stories they had heard, then those they'd witnessed, and finally the things that had happened to themselves. A litany of personal humiliation, outrage, and anger, turned sicklelike back to themselves as humor. They laughed then. . .the ruse they had invented to escape or decrease some threat to their manliness, their humanness. (Morrison, Solomon 83)

According to this passage, racial discrimination has a castrating effect on the black male. This concept was mentioned in Walker's and McMillan's novels as well; racism clearly has a significant impact on the way black men handle

their lives. Although Milkman himself has not encountered any noteable racial struggles, he is affected by the race-related incidents endured by the black men around him because he, too, is a black male.

Milkman's closest friend, Guitar, offers some advice on leading a satisfied life:

> Listen, baby, people do funny things. Specially us. The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game. . .makes us do funny things. Things we can't help. Things that make us hurt one another. We don't even know why. But look here, don't carry it inside and don't give it to nobody else. Try to understand it, but if you can't, just forget it and keep yourself strong, man. (Morrison, Solomon 88)

He later adds, "Everybody wants the life of a black man." (Morrison, Solomon 224) These lines bring up several points common to the three novels examined. Race is an important issue, and it establishes an "us" that in some ways acts as one entity. Another key idea is that of lack of personal responsibility. Guitar does not say he cannot help certain actions because he is actively trying to shirk duties. He does not always understand himself, but he knows that he has certain patterns of behavior that are regular, if inexplicable. Guitar also knows that he must let go, to a degree, of the tension within him that causes him to hurt others. Grange Copeland and Franklin learned the same basic principle: that part of personal power is releasing concern over that which cannot be controlled. Guitar reminds Milkman to free himself from anger and fierce reactions to incidents;

he must do this in order to focus on maintaining his inner fortitude.

Perhaps the clearest indicator of Milkman's evolution into a secure being is the change in his feelings about women. Conveying the revolution in Milkman's thinking appears to be high on Morrison's agenda. She writes several passages of reflection of women for Milkman and she closes the novel with a scene between Milkman and his aunt Pilate, who can be credited with forcing him to redefine his concept of black women. As he commences his travels to places from his past (ostensibly in search of treasure; but he ultimately finds himself), he feels that women such as Hagar merely create pressure. He agrees with Guitar, "And black women, they want your whole self. Love, they call it, and understanding. 'Why don't you understand me?' What they mean is, Don't love anything on earth except me." (Morrison, Solomon 224) This explanation of women seems logical to Milkman, who is already feeling claustrophobic in all relationships.

After some time away from his family and the city he is accustomed to, however, Milkman becomes better connected to his deeper roots, his more ancient relatives. His subsequent adjustment of identity and pride in himself allow him to reconsider his relationship with Hagar. Milkman is almost murdered while in the South; in the moments between life and death, "his life flashed before him, but it consisted of only one image: Hagar bending over him in perfect love, in the most

intimate sexual gesture imaginable." (Morrison, Solomon 282) The love he felt for Hagar and his appreciation of her femininity was real and deep, even if the relationship was tumultuous. Toward the conclusion of the novel:

> His mind turned to Hagar and how he had treated her at the end. Why did he never sit her down and talk to her?..He had used her-- her love, her craziness. . .it told men and other women that he was one bad dude, that he had the power to drive a woman out of her mind. . .because he had fucked her and she was driven wild by the absence of his magnificent joint. (Morrison, Solomon 304)

He understands that Hagar is a human being who deserves to be treated as such. He recognizes that he cares for her, even if he is no longer in love with her. Milkman is free to empathize with Hagar and other women because his heightened awareness of and respect for his deeper past separate him from contemporary trappings, such as cruel male dominance over women.

Milkman also rediscovers an intense pleasure in the tenderness he associates with women, something similar to the comfort he felt in Pilate's house when he was younger. He spends a night with a gentle young woman who bathes him and makes love to him and allows him to do the same for her. He is affectionate and giving with her, and he enjoys the experience. Milkman is now open to care for women as people, while valuing the qualities that belong to them as women.

Milkman's other critical revelation involves the victim mentality and its inherent selfishness:

> Deserve. Now it seemed to him that he was always

> saying or thinking that he didn't deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others. . . Apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved--from a distance, though-- and given what he wanted. And in return he would be. . .what? Pleasant? Generous? Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness.
> (Morrison, Solomon 281)

Milkman sees he has been waiting for things to happen to him and for him; he has never been willing to offer any part of himself to anyone else. He thinks:

> With two exceptions, everybody he was close to seemed to prefer him out of this life. And the two exceptions were both women, both black, both old. From the beginning, his mother and Pilate had fought for his life, and he had never so much as made either of them a cup of tea.
> (Morrison, Solomon 335)

As suggested by his reflections on Hagar, his family, and his relationship with the world, he has faced his self-centeredness and recognizes that it has contributed to his loneliness.

Milkman learns his most powerful lesson from Pilate, a lesson that encompasses the idea of freeing oneself from iron links of anger, bitterness, frustration. The symbol used is flight; according to an old rhyme, Milkman's grandfather was able to fly and escape all that pinned him to the earth. When Pilate dies in Milkman's arms he realizes "Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly." (Morrison, Solomon 340) Metaphorically, this is what the Copelands, the Deads, and Franklin all need to do in order to remain sane, complete people. They cannot leave the

ground; but they must be able to rise above their troubles, both shared and unique, on wings of self-respect.

The nature of the trends are fairly clear; lack of self-respect and self-esteem being the prime culprits for behavior in males that leads to trouble in all areas of life. Some of the common behaviors, such as obsession with possessions, do not appear to be race or even gender specific. They are significant in this genre, however, because a number of African-American female authors feel the need to address such attitudes. These ways of thinking may not be unique to African-American males, but their effects on their friends and families is a major issue in African-American women's literature. The authors connect coping with these issues to dealing with other habits more particular to the black male; in this way, all of the black male behavior trends described in works of this genre become unique to the genre <u>because these are the issues that are significant to African-American women authors</u>. In the three novels written by women from the male perspective, many qualities of the black male characters clearly were specific to that race and gender. These include the feeling of powerlessness in the face of white society and its manner of being carried over into interactions within black society; mistreatment of women because of a desire to feel masculine and in control of <u>someone</u>, since they were not in control of themselves; and a fear of being chained by responsibility or obligation. In establishing their black

male characters, the authors were clear in explaining the connections between racial tension and the development of these traits in men.

The character trends defined in the three novels appear to be generally negative. Does this indicate that the authors are simply trying to lower public opinion of black males? This is the idea behind the accusations of male-bashing which some black female authors have received. The style and tone of the works, as well as the manner in which the male characters are described, do not seem to support the criticism.

In their novels from the male perspective, the authors treat the men as whole people whose feelings and thoughts are valuable. They are not shown as heartless or worthless; they are portrayed as people with much to offer who must learn to make peace with themselves in order to contribute. And while some of the issues the men struggle with are not unique to the African-American male, the fact that three different authors felt the same basic ideas warranted attention in their novels suggests that the issues are of special significance to the black population. The similarities in the characters of The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Disappearing Acts, and Song of Solomon are also evident in male characters in other novels by various authors; what these three books offer is a careful look at the male perspective and the black male's thoughts about his own actions. McMillan, Walker, and Morrison all

indicated that the men had legitimate reasons for developing in the way they did. They also showed that self-pity is a waste, and taking control of oneself while releasing a grip on what one cannot influence is to be commended. Appreciation of people--family, friends, lovers--can be fulfilling if an effort is made in this area. These ideas are not merely feminist, and they are definitely not anti-male. They clearly illustrate the problems a black male is likely to face, and propose ways of dealing with them that allow for continued close relationships with others. Readers who resist the temptation to categorize (and, in a sense, dismiss) the ideas about males presented in the novels, can experience fully the wisdom and compassion of women concerned with the pressing struggles of African-American male.

III. DIFFERENT MEN, DIFFERENT WOMEN, DIFFERENT STORIES

Analyzing the black male in terms of his interactions with and influence on black females provides another perspective on the characterization of the black male. The development of female characters in relation to male characters provides insight into the natures of both genders. As previously mentioned, one of the significant aspects of literature by African-American women is that it highlights the separate, yet interrelated agendas of males and females of the race. The writings are one of the manifestations of the newly tuned black female voice; it follows that one of the major issues in the works is the ways in which the female characters respond to men. A female character's experiences and behavior around men illustrate not only her personality traits, but those of the surrounding male characters. If the author shows a woman as victimized by a male, powerless to change her circumstances, then the reader is likely to see the man as a tyrant. If the author creates a woman who is strong and completely self-sufficient or reliant only on other women for friendship and support, with little interest in or need for men, then the reader may see the male as insignificant in a woman-centered environment. If the author portrays a woman as self-respecting and assertive, able to recognize the unique virtues and flaws (some of which are apparently gender-related) of different people, then the reader might see male characters as complete personalities who do not exist merely

to generate a certain response from women. The women are not making decisions as a reaction to a male behavior; rather, both men and women govern themselves autonomously as they continue to relate to one another.

Some pieces show characters developing toward this way of coexisting; a common pattern is for female characters to progress from being willing victims of domineering males to becoming autonomous, assertive individuals. In works involving a woman's relationship with an unappealing black male, their interactions are often shown as mutually dysfunctional, not pointing a damning finger at black males alone, but acknowledging female frailty or fault.

A consideration of several literary works by black women shows that the authors support healthy relationships in which men and women each play an equally significant part. The writers' hope for comfortable black male/female relationships itself does not support the theory that the authors are trying to denigrate the black male population. Some writing includes sections similar to the second example, the extreme feminist perspective, but the reader must remember that one of the purposes of the literature is to emphasize the words and ideas of the black woman as unique. This ultimate objective, a woman's assertion of her <u>separateness</u> from men in her race is a declaration of independence; it need not be classified as male-bashing or militant feminism. Attempting to categorize all black female writing as such may hide or invalidate

important concepts in the texts.

Numerous writings by a variety of African-American women authors show a growth period for the female characters as well as the males. The concept of personal responsibility, so critical to the black male characters, is also significant to their female counterparts. This in itself suggests that women are not necessarily victims of men, nor are they so focused on men that they are dependent and passive. Nevertheless, personal growth of female characters is often marked by the way they relate to men. At first, her manner of dealing with the sometimes unattractive truths of life perpetuates the idea of the black woman as without the desire or the ability to speak up for herself; this is exactly the image which the authors are trying to counter. By defining stronger female characters, the authors may appear to be belittling males, but the overall tone and plot direction of many stories in the genre show that the major themes relate not to men, but to women. The use of an unappealing male character may be saying more about the voluntary choices of a woman than it says about the black male population per se.

An example of the personality traits and issues black male characters bring to a work is the "fall from innocence" theme, which is repeated in several works and could be misconstrued as extreme feminism or a generally anti-male attitude. In this scenario, a female starts with a romantic ideal that is defeated by blunt, hard reality. That reality

often involves a male persona.

Sherley Anne Williams' short story "Tell Martha not to Moan," published in 1968, offers an example of the "fall." Martha is a persistently naive young black woman who is in love with a lanky pianist named Time. Time tells her he needs her, but not that he loves her:

> I am up tight on the inside but I can't get it to show on the outside. I don't know how to make it come out. . .When I can do that, then I be somewhere. But I can't go by myself. I need a woman. A Black woman.... (48)

In the same conversation, he quotes a song : "When a woman take the blues, she tuck her head and cry. But when a man catch the blues, he grab his shoes and slide" (Williams, "Martha" 48). Time tells Martha that the "god damn white man" is always chasing him, and when he gets too close, Time will leave--with or without Martha. But Martha thinks "He want me and that all I care about" (Williams, "Martha" 48).

The relationship is hardly idyllic. Time seems to have little respect for Martha, and he tells her so. Once Martha tries to talk to him about the images in her mind; he responds, "Least your head ain't empty. Maybe now you got some pictures, you'll get some thoughts" (Williams, "Martha" 50). Martha's mother realizes that Time is not likely to settle down with her daughter, but Martha dismisses her warnings.

The climax occurs when Martha sees Time's refusal to get a steady job or take a risk and try to make a decent living

from his music for the sham it is. She says, "You ain't gon no damn New York City and it ain't the white man gon' keep you. You just using him for scuse cause you scared" (Williams, "Martha" 54). Time hits her. He apologizes profusely, and then disappears from her life.

The story ends not with Martha's acceptance of the situation, but with her stubborn resistance to the facts- in a sense, her refusal to fall from innocence. In the final scene, Martha is daydreaming about Time's return, tuning out her mother's attempts to advise her to forget him. "He be back," she thinks (Williams, "Martha" 55).

The image of the black male, Time, in this tale is indisputably negative. He is clearly a player, and the reader senses from the moment of his introduction that he will abandon Martha. But Martha is <u>not</u> a helpless victim. Martha makes choices that put her in a precarious position. She ignores suggestions from her mother and the facts of the relationship itself, and insists on devoting herself to a man who does not even listen to what she has to say. At the conclusion, the reader is frustrated with Martha, and cannot understand why she will not learn from her recent errors. Importantly, the focus is <u>not</u> on the shortcomings of black men; instead, the story encourages women to be alert to the real world and to recognize what will make them happy and what will disappoint. Williams' work suggests that women keep themselves unsatisfied martyrs by refusing to accept the

responsibility for their own reality.

Another example of a loss of innocence is described in Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place, published in 1980. A young black woman, Mattie, is attracted to Butch, a black man her father considers a "no-'count ditch hound" (Naylor 8).

Butch is alive with a color and vitality unusual in Mattie's disciplined life. He shares gossip with her

> without judging or sneering, but with the same good-natured acceptance that he held toward everything in life. And Mattie found herself being shown how to laugh at things that would have been considered too shamefully ugly even to mention aloud at home. (Naylor 11)

Mattie is skeptical, for she is aware of Butch's promiscuity, but Butch explains to her, "Mattie, I don't run after a lot of women. I just don't stay long enough to let the good times turn sour." Mattie thinks, "there was something remiss in his reasoning and she couldn't quite figure out what it was," but she remains fascinated by Butch (Naylor 16).

Butch takes Mattie to a quiet spot near the sugar cane field. He teaches her an especially pleasurable way of sucking the sweetness from the cane. The final seduction is described powerfully, but not in full:

> He finally looked her straight in the face, and Mattie found herself floating far away in the brown sea of his irises, where the words, shoreline, and anchor, became like gibberish in some foreign tongue.
>
> "Here," he said, holding out a piece of the cane wedge to her, "try it the way I told you."
>
> And she did. (Naylor 18)

Mattie becomes pregnant, and Butch is never heard from again. Their lovemaking and his subsequent disappearance is part of Mattie's loss of innocence, but it is not described in a negative or bitter manner. Butch recognizes Mattie's naivete and her vulnerability to seduction, and his intent in approaching her is to sleep with her. The author shows that Mattie is aware of the fact as well; when Mattie chooses to accompany Butch, she has considered his reputation and decides that experiencing his energy and magnetism is preferable to turning him away and preserving her virginity. Mattie is not portrayed as a victim; she chooses to make herself vulnerable to Butch. More realistic than Martha was when she was in a similar situation, Mattie seems more positive about this particular "fall."

The negative aspect of Mattie's fall from innocence occurs when her father finds out she is pregnant. He blames himself for keeping his daughter too much under parental control, because he cannot imagine her taking any truly unacceptable action. But when she refuses to tell him who the father is, he becomes enraged and threatens to beat her until she tells:

> He wanted to kill the man who had sneaked in to his home and distorted the faith and trust he had in his child. But she had chosen this man's side against him, and in his fury, he tried to stamp out what had hurt him the most and was now brazenly taunting him--her disobedience. (Naylor 23)

He pummels her with a stick until his wife fires a warning

with a shotgun. Then he stops, "he seemed like a man coming out of a trance. . .A slow moan came from the pile of torn clothes and bruised flesh on the floor. Sam Michael looked at it, saw that it was his daughter, and he dropped the stick and wept" (Naylor 24).

This scene is ugly and brutal. Mattie did not deserve such a vicious punishment; she was a victim of her father's rage. Naylor, however, does not lead the reader to despise Sam Michael. A compassionate description of his emotional state, although it does not excuse his behavior, allows the reader to understand Sam's perspective. Naylor's depiction of Sam is similar to the authors' portrayal of male characters in the three novels narrated by a male voice. He is not a one-dimensional tyrant; rather, he has feelings behind his hideous action, motives which a reader can understand if not condone.

Naylor's novel is ultimately a story of women. Mattie's pregnancy and the incident with her father prompt her to move in to a housing development with several other women. Mattie must develop on her own; the personal growth of various female characters is perhaps the major focus of the work. The fact that experiences with men are the catalyst for independence does not mean that the story is anti-male, as shown by the author's characterization of Butch and Sam. Shirley Williams' story also focuses on a woman, although it does not praise her. Naylor's and Williams' pieces are very different, but <u>neither one</u> conveys a negative image of black men as the

primary theme of their stories.

A final example of romantic disillusionment occurs in Toni Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye (published in 1970). Pauline, an adolescent black Alabama girl with a permanently crippled foot, spends a great deal of time fantasizing about encounters with men. She waited years for her perfect "Stranger" to arrive. One day

> He came, strutting right out of a Kentucky sun on the hottest day of the year. He came big, he came strong, he came with yellow eyes, flaring nostrils, and he came with his own music. (Morrison, Bluest Eye 91)

The two enjoy each other's company immensely; from Pauline's perspective:

> He seemed to enjoy her company and even to enjoy her country ways and lack of knowledge about city things. . .She was secure and grateful; he was kind and lively. She had not known there was so much laughter in the world. (Morrison, Bluest Eye 92)

The relationship seems idyllic. Like Mattie, Pauline allows a charismatic man, Cholly Breedlove, to bring brightness into her life. They marry and move up North.

Pauline struggles with the northern social scene: "In her loneliness, she turned to her husband for reassurance, entertainment, for things to fill the vacant places" (Morrison, Bluest Eye 93). Cholly remains nice to his wife, but her dependence begins to chafe on him. After a while, Cholly's own problems with work, money, and an inability to care properly for Pauline cause his temper and alcohol consumption to rise. Pauline's taking on a job as a maid to

add income does not help. Pauline, in a marriage far removed from the honeymoon of their early romance, thinks: "Look like working for that woman and fighting Cholly all I did" (Morrison, Bluest Eye 94).

Pauline ultimately casts herself in the role of martyr. She hides in movie theaters for hours, emerging with a powerful awareness of the gaping chasm between the movie screen heroes and her husband. She joins a church and leads a visibly ascetic life. "She avenged herself on Cholly by forcing him to indulge in the weaknesses she despised. . . Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross" (Morrison, Bluest Eye 100).

Pauline, like Martha, is unable to cope with reality. Cholly treated her badly at times, but Pauline certainly contributed to the loss of her romantic dream--a dream that was unrealistic from the outset. The purpose of examining their story is not to assign blame, but to acknowledge that in showing the dissolution of a relationship, Morrison is not suggesting that black males are the root of all problems. Both Pauline and Cholly have gifts and flaws, and the consequences of their choices and actions are given equal significance in the deterioration of their relationship. Although Cholly is not created as a positive role model, he is written as a realistic figure, as is Pauline. When he is described negatively, it is to contribute to the realism of

his character and the issues he faces as an African-American male, not to indulge in gratuitous male-bashing.

These three examples represent only a few of many instances of falls from innocence. Another case previously mentioned is that of Mem and Brownfield in The Third Life of Grange Copeland, in which both parties started a relationship hopefully and full of love and suffered a series of blows from reality that dropped them in separate but equally miserable places. All of the situations involve a naive woman (sometimes the man is also, but the woman generally seems the most inexperienced) whose outlook changes at least partly as a result of an involvement with a black male. Sometimes the man is wholly responsible for the woman's brutal introduction to a new version of life; sometimes she is equally or more responsible for her own troubles. Regardless of the breakdown, the stories do not push the reader categorically to loathe black men. The "falls" are described in such a way as to strongly emphasize ideas other than that of the image of the black man as mean or unreliable.

Perhaps the characters are mean and unreliable at times, but that is because it is necessary to the story to have those personality traits. In the three cases analyzed previously, as well as numerous others, the works have agendas other than presenting negative male characters. The stories examine and critique the way women handle themselves with such a man, or they explore why men evolve in a certain social direction, but

the scope of the content goes far beyond the image of a flawed black man. This recurring pattern suggests that the portrayal of the black male is a means to an end that should be treated as such. If these works are read as mere anti-male lectures, the more critical social and moral themes will be overlooked.

Some of the fictional black males have very negative effects on the women in their lives. The hurt they cause is serious and not easily forgiven by the other characters or even the reader. The image of black males established in such scenes can be unsettling or even frightening. The following examples may contain elements of the "fall from innocence" theme, but in these passages the important ideas are the way the authors explain certain male actions and their impact on the females. The authors' sympathetic tone (however dreadful the crime) allows the reader to have a balanced view of black male behavior. Because the women involved are shown as victims, a reader may react by feeling protective of the women and hostile toward the men.

The rape of Pecola Breedlove in Morrison's The Bluest Eye clearly describes a young black woman being victimized by a black man. Pecola is Cholly's daughter, age eleven at the time of the rape. Prior to this incestuous act, Cholly feels completely lost for reasons unrelated to his daughter:

> Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him. (Morrison, Bluest Eye 125)

He has tried to locate his father, tried to feel secure in his home and family, and has failed. The presence of his children exacerbates his feelings of inadequacy; he was not parented as a child, so he is at a loss as to how to care for his own offspring.

One Saturday afternoon, Cholly is watching Pecola wash the dishes:

> The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence...Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child--unburdened--why wasn't she happy? The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck--but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her--ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter?..How dare she love him? . .What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love? (Morrison, Bluest Eye 127)

This passage contains several critical ideas, some of which are familiar from the study of the three novels told from the male perspective. Morrison is very clear about Cholly's feelings of frustrated, directionless love. Cholly does care for Pecola, but he is so tangled in his feelings of incompetence and ineptitude as a caregiver that he cannot cope with or express the love. Cholly's malnourished sense of self-worth is common to many of the black male characters previously mentioned. Also familiar is his response to his feelings--hate the victim, hate the one he cannot help because he is unable.

Cholly's internal turmoil is reflected in Morrison's description of the actual rape. The moment before he grabs Pecola, "the tenderness welled up in him" (Morrison, Bluest Eye 28). His act is violent, but it originated in affection, even a desire to be gentle. He feels lust--a combination of memories of a younger, happily innocent Pauline and the temptation of Pecola's ripe body; "Surrounding all this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her--tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold" (Morrison, Bluest Eye 128). The love and frustration seem to be competing in Cholly, sometimes one with the advantage, sometimes the other. This struggle is endured by many other black male characters; they feel tenderness for a woman, and at the same time they are enraged because they believe they cannot provide adequately for those who mean the most to them. These powerful emotions combine and, in Cholly's case as well as others, erupt in violence. Morrison describes Cholly's act as both the most severe crime against a woman and the most intimate expression of love and passion; in this way, he is acting on all of his feelings about Pecola.

After the rape, Cholly observes his daughter on the kitchen floor: "Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her" (Morrison, Bluest Eye 129). Morrison is explicit about the complexity of Cholly's feelings. Cholly mistreats his family in many other ways throughout the novel,

but the author remains sympathetic to a degree. Morrison shows that Pecola is not merely a victim of men as represented by Cholly; she is a victim of the manifestation of Cholly's history and experiences in his choice of actions. The author does not offer excuses for his behavior, nor does she minimize the damage done to his family, but she ensures that the reader does not see him as a cruel misogynist. Cholly is not described as an example for others to follow, but Morrison's tone is not bitter or anti-male. She does not degrade him, even as she explains his most hideous behavior.

Another excellent example of a man who does irreparable damage to the woman he once loved has already been analyzed: Brownfield in Alice Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland. The multi-faceted and compassionate description of Brownfield was previously examined, but there is also significant information in the way Mem is painted by Walker. Mem undergoes a marked metamorphosis during her time with Brownfield. Her personality changes reflect and thus measure the impact of Brownfield's behavior on those close to him.

When Brownfield falls in love with Mem, she is a vivacious, intelligent, kind woman. After they are married, his own life begins to wear on him; Brownfield starts taking his frustrated rage out on Mem. Mem at first tries to accept his struggle, help him cope with it by remaining silent and sympathetic. Her wish to help him and her subsequent self-appointment to the position of martyr do not last. "Her

mildness became stupor; then her stupor became horror, desolation, and, at last, hatred" (Walker, Copeland, p.59). Mem begins to speak up, and she fights vicious verbal battles about the children- what she wants for them versus what Brownfield is offering. She is forced to become callous because of the constant abrasion of Brownfield's presence. As Brownfield treats Mem more and more badly, she becomes stronger of necessity:

> "Let me tell you something, man," Mem said evenly, though breathing hard, "I have worked hard all my life, first trying to be something and then just trying to be. It's over for me now, but if you think I won't work harder than ever before to support these children, you ain't only mean and evil and lazy as the devil, but you're a fool!" (Walker, Copeland 87)

Mem's language has become harsh and grammatically incorrect, although she once spoke gracefully and flawlessly. The aggression is also new. She had been content to act as Brownfield's comfort and support when they were first married, but as Brownfield became bitter, jealous, and unable to accept Mem's help or example, Mem becomes sharp-tongued and physically courageous in order to protect her children's chance at satisfaction in life.

The passage quoted above shows the extent to which Brownfield has damaged Mem's world; she does not even consider her own experiences worth salvaging, she fights only for her children's future. The reader is proud of Mem for taking a stand, ending her attempt to stoically absorb all of her husband's troubles and to support his shaky ego. She says,

"And just think of how many times I done got my head beat by you just so you could feel a little bit like a man, Brownfield Copeland" (Walker, Copeland 94). Seeing how Mem perceives the state of her relationship allows the reader to understand the pain Brownfield has caused.

As mentioned in the study of the male-perspective novels, Mem forces Brownfield to let her support the family in the style she desires by threatening him with a rifle. Brownfield "played his conversion by terror long after the terror was gone and replaced by a great design to express his rage, his humiliation, his deep hatred" (Walker, Copeland 102). Ultimately, he weakens his wife with repeated pregnancies and then shoots her.

From this perspective, Brownfield has absolutely no redeeming qualities. He is cruel and sadistic. He has stolen from Mem her gentleness, her grace, even her memory of her education. He has punished his family for his self-hatred. Brownfield seems a perfect example of overwhelmingly negative black male characterization, if Walker's description is accepted as male-bashing. Perhaps an anti-male sentiment could be read into the way the reader responds to Mem's newly-developed ability to defend herself and her children by yelling at and physically terrorizing her husband--the reader supports her fully and believes Brownfield deserves this treatment. She has been driven to this point by Brownfield, and he should suffer for it. The reader does not pity

Brownfield.

But even Walker's sharp-edged presentation of Brownfield does not preach that all black males are frightening and that women must defend themselves against them. She is instead showing what can happen when a man never learns how to handle himself and his unfortunate experiences. Simultaneously, she shows that playing the martyr is worthless for a woman being victimized--but this does not imply that men merely cause pain to the women near them. The author's elaborate description of the reasons behind Brownfield's attitude and her use of the title character (Grange) to show by contrast a black man's positive development despite a bitter, angry youth both serve to remind the reader that Walker believes that black males can be wonderful family men and can earn the respect of their children. The reader can be proud of Mem for refusing to bend to her husband's maltreatment and can see all that is flawed in Brownfield without determining that all black males are destined to behave like Brownfield.

A less violent story of a black male's negative impact on a black woman is Gwendolyn Brooks' only novel, Maud Martha, published in 1953. This is outside of the time frame of the works examined in this study, but it was excerpted in Mary Helen Washington's 1990 anthology Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds, and it touches on some ideas which are incorporated in numerous later works by Brooks' literary progeny.

In this story, the unfortunate impact the male has on the

female is the weakening of her self-esteem. Maud Martha has "settled" her entire life: settled for marriage instead of travel, for domestication instead of sophistication. Paul, her husband, is trying desperately to achieve a high social standing. He attempts to shape Martha to fit the image he wishes to project, or hides her when she will hinder his social climbing.

Paul is thrilled when he is invited to join the Foxy Cats Club, an elite band of twenty men who "devoted themselves solely to the business of being 'hep'" (Brooks 115). He takes Maud Martha to the initiation ball; she thinks, "I guess he'd rather leave me home"(Brooks 116). When they arrive at the extravaganza, Paul is in his element. But Maud feels differently:

> The Ball made toys of her emotions, stirred her variously. But she was anxious to have it end, anxious to be at home again, with the door closed behind herself and her husband. Then, he might be warm. There might be more than the absent courtesy he had been giving her of late.
> (Brooks 117)

Maud senses Paul losing interest in her, slipping away from her. Her feelings are confirmed when he starts dancing with a red-headed white girl after one token dance with Maud Martha. The reader may feel that Paul is being cruel to Maud Martha, that it is unfair to ignore her just because she no longer suits his social purposes. However, Maud Martha makes a few significant observations which prevent the reader from assuming that Brooks is intent on raising anti-male

sentiments. The first of these is Maud's logical analysis of the reason (although not an excuse) for Paul's behavior:

> But it's my color that makes him mad. I try to shut my eyes to that, but it's no good. What I am inside, what is really me, he likes okay. But he keeps looking at my color, which is like a wall. He has to jump over it in order to meet and touch what I've got for him. He has to jump away up high in order to see it. He gets awful tired of all that jumping. (Brooks 119)

The theory that black men struggle with the blackness of their women is presented in many works by African-American women, especially during the pre- and early Civil Rights movement. Sometimes dark skin inspires rage in black men, because it is a reflection of themselves and the bindings on a race they cannot escape. Sometimes darkness breeds disgust, because the men have accepted the white ideal of beauty as representative of high social standing. Paul's attitude is closer to the latter; he likes Maud Martha as a person, but white skin is a better status symbol, so he cannot fully appreciate his wife. The reader sees Paul, and any black man with similar notions, as shallow and selfish; his treatment of his wife provokes reader resentment. Maud Martha asks a crucial question, however, which lets the reader see the situation differently: "But if the root was sour, what business did she have up there hacking at a leaf?" (Brooks 119). She does not blame the personalities of Paul or other black men. The problem is all of society and the values it promotes; their relationship is only a leaf, blooming from the rotted root of their environment. Paul is not shown as an

exemplary husband or individual, but the author shows clearly that his actions are partly the playing of an established role, as is Maud Martha's silent unhappiness, for that matter. His negative portrayal provides a commentary more concerned with criticizing white society than condemning of black males influenced by false or very limited values. The idea that the behavior guidelines set by society (African-American or otherwise) stimulate friction in relationships between the sexes, thus putting the males in a negative light from the females' viewpoint, also appears in a variety of more recent works in this genre.

A final comment which Maud Martha offers is clearly echoed in later works. After taking a job cleaning for a white woman who states, "I disapprove of mops. You can do a better job on your knees" (Brooks 121), Maud Martha realizes that "for the first time, she understood what Paul endured daily" (Brooks 122). She feels sympathy and understanding for her husband, for the humiliations he suffers regularly. The acknowledgement of Paul's pain does not erase the hurt he causes Maud Martha by his coolness toward her, but it does explain why he is so eager to appear worthy and socially acceptable, even admirable, at the emotional expense of his own wife.

Maud Martha is particularly interesting in this study because it was written years before the strong civil rights push, but it includes themes which are in the forefront of

works written through the 1970's and 1980's. Black women authors are still describing a struggle against "the prevailing cultural ideal for women in the 1940's and 1950's of the self-sacrificing housewife and mother" (Washington, Midnight Birds 111), decades after this novel was published. As previously mentioned, the relationship between the genders affects the image of the black male in the works. If the gender relationship is the same over several decades, as it appears to be, based on the material in Maud Martha and other earlier works, then it is expected that the male characters will have similarities as well. Paul has several negative qualities which are mentioned; they are shared in varying degrees by many of the more current characters. On a case-by-case basis, shown in the novel Maud Martha as well as numerous other pieces, the fact that the descriptions of the black males are far too complex to be conveniently packaged as anti-male becomes apparent.

Some works show black males as wholly negative, without examining the roots of their poor behavior (unlike Morrison's and Walker's writing). An example of this approach is Joanna Clark's short story, "Motherhood," published in Toni Cade Bambara's anthology, The Black Woman, in 1970. The narrator is a mother twice over and does not particularly enjoy the role. She does not appreciate being told how to care for her children; she says, "I was always getting bugged" (Clark 64). This statement describes the speaker's tone throughout the

story; she considers many people, including her children to an extent, mere nuisances. The narrator speaks of her husband with the same attitude. She describes him as a "charming, but philandering and non-supporting Peter Pan of a husband" (Clark 64). Like several other black male characters, "Peter" shirks his family responsibilities. In this story, however, the reader knows only that the husband was kicked out of the house; the specific reasons are not explained. The speaker is cool, sarcastic, and utterly unromantic when she refers to him: "When my husband said 'love,' he meant whatever emotion he could generate in you that would sustain you enough to put up with and for him" (Clark 68). The focus of the speaker's negotiations with "Peter" is the question of who will take care of the children, since neither one of them seems willing or able. She explains, "I was intelligent enough to see that I would have to defer for a while the pleasure of raising his children. That they were his children as well as mine and therefore I had just as much right to cop out as he did" (Clark 69). Maintaining a family of any sort is not important to this narrator. Her cynical tone suggests that her own life is more important than those who impose their needs on her (such as children). The thoughts and feelings of the husband and the children are never acknowledged or discussed by the author.

The story then becomes a monologue rather than a plot, a diatribe expressing certain cause-oriented ideas. The speaker

claims that as a woman, she is unable to get help from society in dealing with a marital separation and raising children--although she feels a man in a similar position would receive aid. She laments the injustice of her position: "I had received the same education as my husband and the same amount of it. . .All right, I'd been foolish enough to have two children, but then, so was he" (Clark 71). She hopes to avoid parental responsibilities also, because she seems to feel if she were a man she would have had better opportunities all along and would not have ended up with two children. The author closes the story with the statement:

> As mothers, we are worse off than we think we are. In this age of the sit-in and the be-in, it is time for a sit-down. And let's not get up off of it until there's at least social security and unemployment insurance for every mother. (Clark 72)

This story is a perfect example of didactic literature. The characters are important only insofar as they support the political purpose of the writing. The tone of this piece seems strident, as it attempts to appeal to women's feelings of oppression by a male-dominated society.

This work, of necessity it seems, includes a completely negative black male character (who is described by the narrator, but who never actually speaks for himself). The characterization expresses the sentiment that women are not receiving treatment equal to that of males, especially by some government institutions such as welfare. The piece is addressed to women. Can it be considered male-bashing? One

could come to this conclusion. However, the reader is constantly made aware that the story presents only one perspective on the situation. The work is an impassioned expression of opinion; there is no effort in the essay to show divergent viewpoints. "Peter" is a one-dimensional figure; all the reader knows of him is that the speaker feels she cannot rely on him.

The time during which the story was printed is significant. The 1970's marked enormous interest in the feminist movement. Clark's work seems to be focused on issues of the period which were not centered on black male/female relationships, but on the way society as a whole continued to suppress black women. The purpose of this work is not to illuminate the natures of the characters, but to increase awareness and interest in a specific cause- that stated in the final lines of the story. These circumstantial facts should be taken into account when attempting to understand why the essay assassinates the character of the black male. The work uses a specific type of male, seen through the eyes of a woman with specific ideas, in order to prove a specific point. His character is defined by the strict role he must play; there is no room for interpretation. In cause-oriented rhetoric, this type of characterization is necessary. Any themes introduced are specific to the context and the time period, rather than universal.

Several of the works examined in this study also came out

of the 1970's, and the analysis applied to Clark's essay does not account for them. The reason is that the other works do not champion a certain cause such as equal welfare. They describe the interpersonal psychological relationships involved in life and human experience. Clark's piece, and others in the same vein, are bound to a time in history and politics. Most of the other writings discussed here, although they are set in particular times, are timeless because they create characters rich enough that readers can understand them and become immersed in their fictional world.

Literature written at a certain time will bear earmarks of that period, but the theory that most books from the 1970's would have a more feminist--or, more aggressively, an anti-male--attitude seems unfounded, based on the literary evidence considered thus far. The major black female authors, along with several of the lesser ones, addressed gender issues with a compassionate and not cause-oriented pen starting in the early 1970's, and the trend continues. Therefore, the majority of works influencing the public's idea of the black male today do <u>not</u> manipulate and limit characterization to a specific cause-related end. Clark's work is a period piece with narrow scope and must be treated as such in studying the image it presents of the black male.

The way black female characters think of and deal with their male counterparts provides useful information about the author's ideas for sketching the black male. Sometimes when

a black man appears in an unflattering light, a black woman involved in the plot is shown as pushing him toward certain behaviors, or making unrealistic demands, or otherwise setting him up to fail her. Or the black women feel so positively for their men that the reader sees the writing as expressing optimism about the future of the black man and his relationships.

An example of a relationship in which the man is virtually doomed to remain unsatisfactory is described in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye. Pauline Breedlove, once starry-eyed with passion for Cholly Breedlove, becomes a bitter wife. Her disappointment in Cholly manifests itself in her making a point of her moral superiority to her husband, and she starts fights with him frequently to ensure that he fills his role as an inferior burden to her.

> To deprive her of these fights was to deprive her of all the zest and reasonableness of life. Cholly, by his habitual drunkenness and orneriness, provided them both with the material they needed to make their lives tolerable. Mrs. Breedlove considered herself an upright and Christian woman, burdened with a no-count man, whom God wanted her to punish. . .She needed Cholly's sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus. (Morrison, Bluest Eye 36)

Pauline almost encourages Cholly to decline when his self-esteem begins to suffer and he starts drinking heavily and verbally abusing because "She was one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch. He poured out the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her,

he could leave himself intact" (Morrison, Bluest Eye 37). Pauline takes on the role of martyr not because she thinks it will help their marriage, but because she believes it will give her an admirable image in the eyes of the women of her community. It is undeniable that some of Cholly's actions are inexcuseable, but Pauline makes no effort to facilitate his redemption--even to help her children. The entire relationship is portrayed as dysfunctional. The true victim is Pecola, the daughter who was poorly raised by both parents, who are at once victims and culprits.

Pauline is not to blame for Cholly's mishandling of his low self-esteem, but Morrison states clearly that Pauline does not try to help him or her family. First she avoids the situation by immersing herself in movies and a white family's household, then she capitalizes on the problem for personal gain. She wants to act the victim because it makes her secure in her ability to look down on Cholly. The novel shows a realistic portrait of troubled people--both genders--and certainly does not hold Cholly up as a source of trouble whose extraction would provide a healthy environment. The negative portrayal of Cholly is evident, but the work is not biased to present the central male character as the only rotten spot in the story. This fact indicates that the piece is not written from an anti-male standpoint, nor does it preach extreme feminist doctrine.

Terry McMillan's Mama, published in 1987, offers another

example of a situation in which a woman puts a man in a vulnerable position. The novel revolves around a middle-aged black woman, Mildred, whose husband leaves her to raise several children on her own. Mildred wants a man in her life, but she makes some poor choices which leave her alone. For a while, she pursues a flirtatious married man named Spooky. Her shocked children warn her of his reputation as a player, and remind her that he is married. "What the hell, Mildred thought, she was fucking a dream and loving every minute of it" (McMillan, Mama 65). Frequently throughout her affair with Spooky, she "couldn't remember her children, by name or by face, and in her heart, she didn't have any...."(McMillan, Mama 65).

Spooky, not unexpectedly, returns to his wife leaving Mildred enraged and hurt. She "made up her mind that this would be the last time she would open up her heart so eagerly and generously, only to end up feeling like it was a fresh-cut wound that some man had poured salt into" (McMillan, Mama 72). Out of context, this passage could suggest that Mildred is an unwitting victim, a naive woman wishing to share herself with a loving man, who has become hardened because she has been mistreated. Would such a narrow interpretation reflect the true situation?

In this case, Mildred knew Spooky's nature and was aware that the adjectives commonly associated with him included "sneaky" and "no good" (McMillan, Mama 64). She chose to

ignore her children's pleas to stay away from him; sometimes she ignored her children completely in favor of him. She uses Spooky as an escape from the responsibilities of her own life and as a means of shallow fulfillment through sex. She allows herself to get emotionally attached, and therefore feels mistreated when he acts in the way everyone who knew him predicted. Spooky is definitely not a desirable man in terms of his ideas about commitment; he is barely above contempt. But it is Mildred's fault that she found herself abandoned by him; he never pretended to be anything he was not, but she never faced what he obviously was. Because of Mildred's responsibility for foolishly and selfishly becoming involved with a man who was guaranteed to hurt her, the negative portrayal of Spooky emphasizes her folly more than his flaws. He may be a particularly unpleasant specimen of the black male population, but the chapters including him show Mildred's irresponsibility more than they indict men in general.

Mildred's next relationship ends badly also. The trend of unhappy involvements told primarily from a woman's perspective could lead a reader to believe that the author is showing all males as worthless and incapable of a successful commitment--McMillan has received such criticisms. Again, it is important to review the context of the relationship and the many character facets of both the men and the women, and especially to understand the perspective of the narrator.

After Spooky leaves her, Mildred reaches for "stupid,

smelly, ugly Rufus" (McMillan, Mama 72)-- her daughter's words. She marries him quickly, for convenience: "He can help me pay these bills" (McMillan, Mama 72), Mildred explains. Mildred is just using him, and Rufus senses that their marriage is empty:

> . . .Rufus drank too much. At first he seemed to have it under control, but when Mildred started ignoring him under the covers at night...and giving him orders like he was one of the kids, Rufus began hitting the bottle....
> (McMillan, Mama 75)

Mildred criticizes him constantly, and is ashamed to be seen in public with him. This situation is almost entirely Mildred's fault--Rufus is the victim. Ironically, some traits that have been shown as frequently occurring in black male characters can be recognized in Mildred's behavior. McMillan fully describes the consequences of Mildred's self-centered decision. The author does not suggest that Mildred has been victimized, except perhaps in her first marriage. She shows that Mildred's choices in handling her sudden singleness are not well thought out; she does not consider the needs and feelings of her children, the men she chooses, or even what she herself is really pursuing in a relationship. As a result, her affairs leave casualties including herself, her family, and Rufus.

Rufus drinks too much and does not satisfy Mildred, but this is the result of Mildred's own actions and choices. The author makes that fact patently obvious. These two examples from Mama show that McMillan presents balanced

characters; Mama is mainly about Mildred, so she earns the most detailed character portrait, but from the way she is presented the reader can see that the reason she is disappointed by men is that she chooses men who will not live up to her selfish desires. This is not "male-bashing;" Mama is not an anti-male work. McMillan does not claim there are no respectable black men available, rather, she contends that if a woman makes poor decisions it is likely that she will be unhappy. The novel is about the women, not the men--McMillan addresses some issues that concern men, but the primary focus is on how these issues affect women.

In Waiting to Exhale, McMillan's bestseller novel of 1992, the author concentrates on the experiences of four black women in Arizona. Male-female relationships are a significant part of the plot, and sometimes the men involved do not have particularly attractive natures. Because this novel is recent and widely read, it can be considered a contributor to the development of the idea that many African-American women authors are belittling African-American men in their writing. The novel does involve several unpleasant male characters (although many of them are superficially terrific), but McMillan often repeats the theme that if a woman allows herself to play the role of martyr, she will suffer for it. In an interview, she explains:

> In Waiting to Exhale I was more interested in "types"...I was more concerned about the different kinds of situations that women have found themselves in regardless of whether or not they

> put themselves in that position...where dealing with men makes it a little more difficult for them to have a good, strong, healthy, positive relationship.

The martyr image is frequently associated with black women; as in Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland, when Mem tries to absorb Brownfield's rage by quietly swallowing it for him, or in Morrison's The Bluest Eye when Pauline acts the martyr as publicly as possible. If one of the goals of African-American women's writing is to promote the expression of the black female voice, then martyrdom is not useful to the cause or to the individuals involved. By asserting that black women have a choice in their responses, the author indicates that black men are not solely responsible for the condition of black females. This idea allows for flexibility in black male characterization: some may truly brutalize and victimize women; others may attempt to do so, but their success or failure is dependent on the women's response; and still others may do neither of the above. The author is not bound to create characters who prove that the long-standing silence of the black woman is entirely the fault of the black man, therefore guaranteeing a negative impression of black males--rather, it is a function of the entire experience of African-Americans.

Savannah, the first central character introduced in Waiting to Exhale, provides an example of a woman who makes choices about her life in relation to black men and suffers certain consequences as a result. Savannah is not portrayed

as a victim, although she is hurt by men. Her experiences are described in a manner that tells the reader that pain is part of loving, that our decision to open ourselves makes us vulnerable. But such common struggles do not imply that black males are somehow universally flawed; it merely offers that intimate relationships are imperfect, as are the persons involved (some more imperfect than others). Savannah enjoys having men in her life, and having a marriage and a family is a goal. However, she does not subscribe to the attitude about which her mother lectures: "You've been by yourself for so long, Savannah, we just want to make sure you ain't lonely . . . Every woman needs a man, and you ain't no exception" (McMillan, Exhale 211). Savannah wants a man, but knows she will not take the first available and expect him to fulfill her needs and wishes; this would exhaust him (like Cholly in The Bluest Eye) and assure her unhappiness.

Savannah encounters her former lover, Kenneth, whom she left four years ago. Now married, he contacts her and arranges to see her while on a business trip to Phoenix. She thinks, "Kenneth is probably the reason why I expect so much from men. When I was with him, he treated me like a lady. Once you get used to being treated well, you can't go back to bullshit...." (McMillan, Exhale 207). Their relationship had ended because Kenneth never expressed his emotions, and when Savannah realized she was in love with him, she was afraid to tell him--so she left him. Her affectionate feelings for

Kenneth are easily accessed because she never had a reason to hate him, so she continued to care for him, however remotely. Kenneth seems attracted to Savannah again, and tells her he is thinking of leaving his wife. They spend an evening together which becomes a full night. Following the incident, Savannah makes a choice which limits her chance to be "victimized" by Kenneth. She explains to him:

> I mean, it's one thing when you just hop on top of somebody and bang 'em and then get up and go home. But it's quite another thing when you used to love somebody and then they hold and caress you the way you did me. I feel weird. . .I'm too old for this, Kenneth. . .To be sleeping with an ex-lover who happens to be very married. . .I can't. I'd be doing myself another injustice.
> (McMillan, Exhale 261)

This passage show Savannah's weakness for Kenneth, and her decision not to pursue the affair because it had the potential for considerable emotional pain. The author does not encourage the reader to condemn Kenneth for cheating on his wife and possibly misleading Savannah; instead, she focuses on Savannah's taking responsibility for her future. In this episode, McMillan is not emphasizing Kenneth's shortcomings, as an anti-male treatment of such an encounter easily might.

Kenneth remains a relatively vague character; the reader does not have enough information to determine whether he is straightforward or not. However, some of the other males introduced in this novel are definitely not respectable; they appear to put women in the role of victim. Does this suggest

a male-bashing theme? The answer lies in how these tales are presented by the author.

One example is the situation of Bernadine, a housewife whose husband leaves her for his white secretary. To her knowledge, her husband was satisfied with their marriage; she was completely abandoned, and her ex-husband does not seem to have any acceptable excuse for his action. This scenario could be painted in such a way as to highlight the husband's failures and his maltreatment of his wife. However, Bernadine offers these thoughts:

> Of course this is all your fault, Bernadine, because you like a fool you acquiesced too soon and gave up too much. You fell right into the blueprint of <u>his</u> life and gave up your own. Let him talk you into leaving Philadelphia and moving out here to Phoenix, where the overhead was supposedly low. He knew you had always wanted to start a catering business, but John said to wait. . .Right after you got married, John started his litany. "One day, I'm going to have exactly what they have," he'd say. "They" being rich white folks. He had taken it to the extreme, gone completely overboard, but you couldn't tell him that. Didn't know <u>how</u> to tell him. You didn't know that you had no courage, or that you'd need so much of it, as far as dealing with your husband was concerned. . .But you were his wife, and you had done what you'd been taught to do: let him take the wheel while you took the backseat.
> (McMillan, <u>Exhale</u> 30-32)

This passage contains several key ideas. First, it shows Bernadine reflecting on her own responsibility for her current predicament. Although she certainly was the victim of a selfish man, she sees where she made choices that allowed him to have control over her and keep her from the achievement of her dreams. A related idea expressed in the passage shows

that the woman's tendency toward martyrdom is a taught behavior, established both by society at large and Bernadine's own relatives. By extension, the male behavior is probably also passed down the family line (this theme was previously addressed in detail in this study). Each behavior encourages the other; the reader sees that certain behavior routines must be blamed not only on individuals, but on patterns defined by society (African-American included) itself. The fact that the novel does not try to attach total responsibility for unequal gender relations to black males weakens the theory that the work is an exercise in "male-bashing."

Bernadine does not like John, and she makes that clear throughout the novel, but she feels her submissiveness encouraged him to step on her. She does not generalize about all black males; rather, she sees where her own weaknesses exacerbated the negative traits specifically in John. She does not blame herself for his nature, but she blames herself for how it came to affect her life. Bernadine uses the incident to identify where she needs to grow in strength and assertiveness. The establishment of this self-awareness derives from an unbalanced relationship with an undesirable man, but this fact does not indicate an overall anti-male sentiment.

Reiterated in this passage is the concept that black males' need for possessions in order to compete with white men can be consuming. This theme has been repeated several times

in the works analyzed; mentioning it here merely reminds the reader that this particular trend in black male characterization has spanned many pieces. In John's case, he tries to "act white" in order to feel successful. He made many decisions for the family based on his need to prove himself to the white majority by imitating it, and these choices did not always please Bernadine. His breaking up the family was a direct result of his social climbing.

John's character is obviously not shown as a good example of a man and husband. He suffers one of the common compulsions of black male characters, and he seems to have few redeeming qualities. Yet his characterization in the novel serves to catalyze Bernadine's personal development, which is critical to the central theme of a quest for identity by black women in search of themselves and their true voices. John leaves a negative impression; but after sharing Bernadine's thoughts, the reader is likely to believe that had Bernadine been more forceful during her marriage, she would have either improved her situation by requiring that her needs be met or abandined it if it appeared hopelessly unsatisfying. The work does <u>not</u> assert that John is representative of all black males (although he may share qualities with a group of them), or that black men categorically cause disruption and struggle.

A second example of a negative male characterization which does not strongly support an anti-male theme occurs in the story of Robin, a thirty-five year old black woman whose

perversely deliberate naivete causes her pain. Robin is involved with Russell, a man who repeatedly promises that he will eventually marry her: "I do wanna marry you, Robin. But it's a big commitment, and I'm just trying to get used to the whole idea" (McMillan, Exhale 40). She met Russell while he was involved with another woman, and when she finds a slip that does not belong to her in his gym bag she strongly suspects that he is seeing someone else-- but she does not confront him. Robin says: "So, like a fool, I kept my fingers crossed and hung in there another six months. I didn't wanna lose Russell. . .I did everything in my power to make sure Russell would keep loving me" (McMillan, Exhale 40).

Robin's motivations for wanting Russell come out during her monologue. When she let him move in with her, she thought, "I felt like I had finally been blessed, because Russell was so fine that every black woman in America in her right mind probably wished she could have him" (McMillan, Exhale 41). After she finally tells him to leave, she realizes: "I did not like being by myself and wasn't used to it. I can't remember the last time I didn't have a man in my life" (McMillan, Exhale 44).

Robin was desperate to be romantically attached, and she was more interested in Russell's body and external image than in who he really was; consequently, she neglected her inner self and concentrated all her energy on making herself look attractive for Russell. She ignored warning signals of rifts

in the relationship until she was virtually forced to acknowledge them. Long after the relationship ends, and she has decided to carry his baby to term, Robin reflects:

> I don't want [Russell]. He's no good. Rotten to the core. . .I've let him hurt me too many times. And I'm tired of being a fool. Tired of giving him so much power. Over me. Over my life. (McMillan, Exhale 392)

Like Bernadine, Robin sees her own part in her unhappiness with Russell.

Again, the common theme of black women reclaiming power over themselves and their feelings is discussed. The focus of McMillan's description of the relationship is on the connection among Robin's acknowledgement of herself, her choices, and her degree of satisfaction in life. Russell is, like John, not particularly savory; but had Robin been more in control of herself, would she have stayed with him so long? In an interview, McMillan explains:

> I don't think that there's a reason or way that I could lump all women together as to why we make bad choices with men--some of us are just stupid, some of us are just hungry and desperate and crave love and we'll get it any way we can get it, sometimes we think we're making the right choices and we find out later that we didn't, you know?

The author does not imply that the majority of black men are unsatisfactory, but that women like Robin and Bernadine choose such men because they do not value their real needs. Russell's negative portrayal does not serve the purpose of casting the black male community in a poor light. Again, it is difficult to consider McMillan's novel anti-male.

The story of the fourth character, overweight Gloria, provides perhaps the best indication that McMillan is not trying to denigrate black male society. Gloria's ex-husband left her when he admitted he was homosexual, and she has had little involvement since the divorce with any male other than her adolescent son. When a new neighbor moves in, much to her surprise, Gloria discovers she has a kind, attractive friend. His name is Marvin, and when she leaves his house after bringing him a welcoming pie she feels "...tickled as she wanted to be, because no man had ever waited to watch her cross a street before, no man had ever volunteered to fix anything for her, and no man had ever made her feel this giddy" (McMillan, Exhale 301). Their friendship is warm and not flashy, and the author never suggests that Marvin is not as genuine as he seems. To the reader's knowledge, the couple remain together happily for the length of their lives. McMillan clearly expresses that there are wonderful black men available in America.

Waiting to Exhale may seem to portray black males in a negative light because the women's regaining of control over themselves is often a direct result of leaving or losing a man who preferred them in a position of powerlessness. McMillan emphasizes in several parts of the novel that women must stay alert and choose to avoid men who will hold them down. The author does suggest that in contemporary African-American culture, the black males do tend to try to dominate the women;

and that no one expects to hear a black woman speak up in her own defense in a relationship. This is not so much an attack on the men as it is an observation of society and a recommendation for functioning in such an environment. McMillan's women are finding their voices, and perhaps they will all be as selective as Gloria in finding a permanent black male companion. McMillan creates several black male characters, and many of them leave much to be desired, but the other characters (such as the women) help remind the reader that the author is not attempting to prejudice readers against black men. She is just defining characters who are necessary to the purpose of the story--to show the women's development of the ability to speak loudly for themselves.

Another example of a narrative whose description of a black male provides insight into the nature of a black female is Alice Walker's short story "Roselily." The piece was printed as part of an anthology titled In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women published in 1967. It is told from the black female narrator's perspective.

Roselily is anxious about her decision to marry the man who proposed to her, and she is reflecting on her choice up to and beyond the wedding ceremony. Her fiance seems dominating and more interested in the role she fulfills in his life than in her as a person. These traits make him undesirable in an environment where black women voice their needs and demand to be treated as whole people: the liberated environment

advocated by many of the black women authors of the 1960's. Walker's story offers an example of how a man whose nature violates the principles of the black-womanist movement can be portrayed without being condemned by his creator. Walker's story raises far more questions about the female narrator than it leads readers to disapprove of the man.

The speaker seems to view her own life through a haze of confusion--she found herself pregnant several times before she married, not quite sure how it happened or how to deal with the children. She attaches herself to a strong black man with a clear personal definition of gender roles, and because he appeals to her ideas of manhood:

> She does not even know if she loves him. She loves his sobriety. . .She loves his pride. His blackness and his gray car. She loves his understanding of her condition. She thinks she loves the effort he will make to redo her into what he truly wants. (Walker, "Roselily" 7)

She explains to herself the reasons she had for agreeing to marry him:

> Her place will be in the home, he has said, repeatedly, promising her the rest she had prayed for. . .She wishes she had asked him to explain more of what he meant. But she was impatient. Impatient to be done with sewing. With doing everything for three children, alone. . .Her husband would free her. A romantic hush. Proposal. Promises. A new life! Respectable, reclaimed, renewed! Free! In robe and veil. (Walker, "Roselily" 7)

From the brief description of the husband's plans for her, and his desire to mold her into a wife of whom he approves, the reader can readily predict that the narrator will not earn

freedom through marriage. The male is strict and definitive about his concept of a woman and wife, and one infers that if the woman does not cooperate with his intentions, she will no longer be well-received.

Does the piece offer thoughts about the victimization of women by dominant men, and does it state such thoughts in a way that unfairly stereotypes black males? Or does the story focus on the flaw inherent in tying all one's dreams to the coattail of a man, just because he will marry the individual (even if he will make some changes first)? By the way the speaker second-guesses herself and feels she could have benefitted from thinking through her decision further, Walker seems to show that the woman set herself up for a potentially unsatisfying marriage.

The man is not characterized in a particularly positive manner:

> He stands curiously apart, in spite of the people crowding about to grasp his free hand. He smiles at them but his eyes are as if turned inward. He knows they cannot understand he is not a Christian. He will not explain himself. . . [Roselily] feels ignorant, wrong, backward. She presses her worried fingers into his palm. He is standing in front of her. In the crush of well-wishing people, he does not look back.
> (Walker, "Roselily" 8)

But his stiff, unwieldy nature reflects a hasty decision made by the narrator; not the author's idea of the personality traits of most black men. He is an individual unwisely accepted by Roselily. Had she considered him more carefully, or been more in control of her life, perhaps she could have

avoided the sinking nervousness of her wedding day. The story is about a decision Roselily made, which happened to involve a man who is not likely to support her development as a person--at least, not as her own person. Walker does not suggest that all or even many black men try to manipulate their wives and take advantage of their naivete; rather, she shows that women must make conscious, careful choices about their lives or they may find themselves in an inflexible trap of their own choosing.

"Roselily" does not really focus on black males; what can it add to this study? "Roselily"'s black male character is far from a hero, but Walker emphasizes Roselily's responsibility in her destiny. The piece is not anti-male because it does not inspire the reader to respond negatively to the male character; the reader does not end the story feeling distasteful toward black males. "Roselily" provides a good example of a work that has a negative image of a black male personality, but absolutely does not lean toward male-bashing; it includes even less evidence of such prejudice than McMillan's works, and it was composed during an especially proactive period of feminism. It reminds us that there are many relatively contemporary works by black female authors which could not possibly be classified as man-hating; such a reminder extends to recent blanket criticisms, suggesting that accusations of anti-black-male writing are not fair and may not even be applicable in many cases.

Aside from the way black males relate to black females in the plots, several works contain descriptions of the male character itself, regardless of how he may influence the women he encounters. There are numerous examples of such passages; some will be examined here to provide information about other trends in black male characterization.

The black males character's apparent lack of responsibility has been mentioned previously; one manifestation of this quality is a tendency to physically flee when pressure--whatever the nature--increases. This idea was introduced in "Motherhood" when the speaker's husband abandons his family. Another example occurs in Toni Morrison's novel Sula, published in 1973. One of the characters is a well-built, extremely dark-skinned man called Ajax; he is romantically involved with the title character for part of the story. At first, their relationship was mainly sexual and was a result of Sula's seduction. As they spent more time together, Sula became interested in his thoughts and feelings, his complete self. After an incident involving poor race relations:

> . . .Sula, the green ribbon shining in her hair, was flooded with an awareness of the outside world on Ajax. . .Putting her fingers deep in the velvet of his hair, she murmured, "Come on. Lean on me." Ajax blinked. Then he looked swiftly into her face. In her words, in her voice, was a sound he knew well. For the first time he saw the green ribbon. He looked around and saw the gleaming kitchen and the table set for two and detected the scent of the nest. Every hackle on his body rose, and he knew that very soon she would, like all of her sisters before her, put him the death-knell

> question "Where have you been?" His eyes dimmed with a mild and momentary regret. . .He dragged her under him and made love to her with the steadiness and intensity of a man about to leave for Dayton. (Morrison, Sula 135)

This passage shows Ajax' nature. He has no desire to be a part of a serious commitment. He is a transient person, free to wander as he pleases. Morrison never raises reader expectations, so when Ajax leaves Sula, the departure seems more inherent cultural imperative than personal abandonment. The author does not give any explanation for his behavior, unlike in The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Song of Solomon, and several other works. The reader sees only that Ajax runs when Sula begins to become attached to him.

Another example of similar behavior is shown in Dori Sanders' novel Her Own Place, published in 1993. Jeff Barnes marries the central character, young Mae Lee, immediately before leaving to fight in World War II. After returning, he tries to settle down with his wife and daughter, but "as much as it had pleased Jeff Barnes to have his own land to farm, it was not enough to hold him in Rising Ridge" (Sanders 32). His involvement with his family followed a pattern:

> Jeff would come home for a few weeks, [Mae Lee] would conceive a child, and then he would be off again. . .He would come home, then after a few weeks announce that he'd heard of a better job someplace else, and would look all lovesick at her with his strange-colored eyes and say "Baby, we are going to have to move on. I won't go without you. I absolutely refuse." And each time he'd stand there waiting for her answer, knowing full well she wouldn't go. (Sanders 33)

Jeff seems fairly calculating; he knows Mae Lee will let him

roam as he pleases, so he can have a family without the responsibility. Mae Lee attributes his restlessness to his experience in the war, but the third-person narrator offers no support to this belief. The reader is inclined to feel that Jeff is, like Ajax, an unsettled (and unsettleable) man who puts his personal needs well before those of anyone else in his life.

The reader becomes more convinced of this explanation after reading the following passage:

> . . .the next time he offered to take [Mae Lee] with him she took him up on it. She meant it, and was so excited by her decision that she misread the pained disappointment in her husband's eyes, the crack in his voice, as signs of his surprise and pleasure. (Sanders 34)

On the day of their intended departure, Jeff leaves early. He leaves no forwarding address. Mae Lee is forced to accept that he is gone and continue raising her children alone.

Neither of these examples offer an in-depth analysis of these male characters. The narrators are not trying to protect the men, nor are they attempting an overt condemnation. They merely tell what happened, as if it were unavoidable due to the natures of Jeff and Ajax. The image of the restless black male who refuses to be tied down is introduced in several different works. Characters like Ajax and Jeff, and others previously mentioned such as Time ("Tell Martha Not to Moan") and Russell (Waiting to Exhale), serve to establish situations in which black women must decide to function on their own. They create environments in which the

females can show their strength and ability to survive as individuals; emphasizing that what is uniquely female is also strong is one of the main ideas established in many works by African-American women. Alternatively, such men help illustrate the consequences for women who choose poorly, for those who do not accept responsibility for their own security and happiness. In studying a work, the reader must determine the purpose of a character. One must recognize the central character and see how the supporting characters involve themselves with the main person. If a variety of works are trying to bring out the voice of a certain character or group, as in the case of African-American women authors emphasizing the experiences of the African-American women in their writing, then there will probably be similarities among the supporting casts of the various works. This helps explain the repeated negative image of the black male, especially those who are relevant in the plot but are not developed thoroughly as characters. In many cases, the author is not concentrating on the male; her primary statement is about the female. Therefore, although establishing an unflattering picture of the black male without complex character development, the author is intending to highlight certain actions and thoughts of the female characters--she is not intent on making a generalization about black men. This technique is not condemnation by neglect; although the men are not points of focus, they still have a significant impact (either positive

or negative) on the women in their lives. A work that does not concentrate intensely on males is simply pursuing a different direction; it is not necessarily shunning black men to make a statement against them.

A unique perspective on the black male is provided in Frenchy Hodges' short story "A Requiem for Willie Lee," printed in Mary Helen Washington's anthology Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Pearls. Willie Lee is a black male student who represents "all the young blacks of this country whose very inheritance is to be repressed by physical and psychic violence" (Washington, Midnight Birds 210). The plot involves a schoolteacher on vacation who meets Willie Lee when he attempts to rob the resort area she is patronizing.

> "In 'Requiem,' Willie Lee is as threatening to the black middle-class schoolteacher as he once was to whites. The act of reconciliation between the schoolteacher and Willie Lee exemplifies a recurrent theme in black literature, the male outcast aided and understood by more conservative women, from Ellison's Invisible Man to Paule Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstone." (Washington, Midnight Birds 210)

This piece is significant because it offers a description of a black male which is common in black literature, and because it includes a female character who expresses a feeling of responsibility for Willie Lee.

When the young black man enters the room full of resort guests, the female schoolteacher narrator thinks:

> Right away I knew him. Well, not him, but from some wellspring of intuition I knew into him and sensed some sinister intent enter that room in the winsome grin and bold arresting gaze that played

around the room. (Hodges 212)

The woman's immediate understanding of the stranger suggests that his attitude and behavior are somehow familiar to her, because she has seen it many times before. She also thinks:

> Years of teaching and I knew him. Smart, a very sharp mind, very intelligent and perceptive but reached by so many forces before me, yet coming sometimes and wanting something others had not given, others who didn't know how, some not knowing he needed, grown in the street and weaned on corners, in alleys, and knowing only a wild creative energy seeking something all humans need. I knew him, looked in his eyes and perceived the soul lost and wandering inside. (Hodges 213)

The passage shows what happens to a young person whose particular emotional needs are not fulfilled, who is not well-guided in his development into an adult. Several male characters discussed in writing within the genre of African-American women's literature were not carefully or effectively overseen by parents or others as they matured; examples include Brownfield Copeland, Milkman Dead, Cholly Breedlove, Franklin. Such characters must survive with one less resource for strength, and the need to deal with racial issues demands considerable internal fortitude. The fact that these characters develop poor habits to cope with their feelings and loss of sense of self and self-worth follows Hodges' explanation that individuals who do not get what they need while growing will one day have a "soul lost and wandering" like Willie Lee.

As Willie Lee taunts and threatens the crowd, the schoolteacher observes her captor as she plots her escape:

"Dreamlike I saw a little lost boy sitting in my class, wanting something--love maybe--but too lost, misguided and misbegotten and too far along on a course impossible to change and too late if we but knew how" (Hodges 215). Again, the narrator is reminded of numerous black boys she has previously encountered; boys she knew were destined to suffer and fail in their lives. She suggests that she wishes she knew how to help such people--she laments her apparent inability to make a difference--but not only does she feel helpless, she believes other circumstances and events have already put such children beyond her reach when she meets them. This shows how negative traits and behaviors perpetuate themselves; after a certain point in a child's life experience, they are an unavoidable inheritance.

Willie Lee takes the schoolteacher, her friend, and her friend's daughter hostage as he flees the police. The narrator tries to tell Willie Lee that his plan will not work, he cannot outrun the police, especially not with hostages and his little sister in tow. Finally, grudgingly, he accepts her advice and disappears alone into the woods.

> Why couldn't you stop, Willie Lee, when it started going wrong and kept on going that way? You're not a fool because I know you from each year you've been in my classes, and when I've tried to teach you, reach you, touch you, love you, you've snarled "Take your hands off me" and I've kept to myself and tried my best to forget every one of you.... (Hodges 220)

The police ultimately find Willie Lee and shoot him. Wounded, he manages to hide himself and keep his unarmed pursuers at

bay with his gun. He is calling for the schoolteacher, who is looking for him. She thinks: "He was my student who failed and I was the teacher who'd failed him...And I'm the only person who knows him and can love the little boy hurting inside" (Hodges 220). When she finds him, she calls him by name and reaches out to him: "I opened wide my arms and silently bade him come. He dropped his gun and came paining into my arms" (Hodges 221). She holds him, and they laugh loudly together over his disruption of the vacationers' day until he dies.

The schoolteacher must have enormous personal strength to accept the pain of Willie Lee and so many others before and after him. Although she has tried to escape the responsibility of caring for people she doubts can ever change, she realizes that they need love desperately and there are few who are equipped to offer it. Many black male characters express a need for care; one reason frequently offered by female characters for their acceptance of the role of martyr for years is that the males needed so much to bolster their egos. A critical theme in this story is that some people (black men, in the narrator's experience) are extremely emotionally needy. Another important idea is that those women who are able to understand the men want to ease their hurt, comfort the wounded spirit. It seems that many African-American women authors possess this level of comprehension of the black male psyche and feelings, and their

works promote such understanding. Several of the works which had central male characters led the reader to wish the suffering men could be helped. Perhaps the authors have the same desire to care for their male counterparts as the schoolteacher did; their works, which provide a means for readers of all races and both genders to appreciate the black male experience, are part of their way of offering their arms to the black man.

In the works discussed, black males play a significant role in that either their own character development is an integral part of the plot, or their effect on the growth and behavior of the black female characters is significant to the story. However, some literature by African-American women puts minimal emphasis on issues involving black males. This fact is important because it reminds the reader that African-American women authors have many areas of life they examine in their works; they do not write merely to describe their experience relative to the black male. By remembering that most of black women's writing is not a reaction to black men, the reader is less likely to attempt to classify the writing as belonging to an anti-male movement.

An recent, significant example of such a work is April Sinclair's novel Coffee Will Make You Black. It is her first novel, published in 1994. Set in Chicago's Southside from 1965-1970, it tells the story of Jean "Stevie" Stevenson's development through adolescence. The race issue is very

clearly the main focus of the work; Stevie's thoughts on the Black Power and Civil Rights movements are emphasized, as well as her experience with interracial interactions and relationships. Stevie experiments with her sexuality with some young black men, but she is less concerned with the nature of the boys involved than with her own feelings and curiosity about the experience and whether she will get caught by her parents.

There is some discussion of black male characters in the novel. When Stevie is attending a party for her friend Carla Perkins, she finds herself talking to Mrs. Perkins while the other guests are involved in a game. Mrs. Perkins is smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer, wearing clothes that fit too tightly and hair coloring that is too obvious. She suddenly spits her words of wisdom at Stevie: "Promise me you'll never put your trust in no man" (Sinclair 68). Stevie thinks, "I didn't know what to say. I trusted my father and my uncle." The older woman continues:

> If you make it in this world you're gonna have to make it all by your lonesome. Do you hear me? Cinderella was not written about the negro woman. Do you understand? . .Your Prince Charming ain't never gonna come! Do you hear me? (Sinclair 69)

Mrs. Perkins' husband left her alone to raise three children, so both Stevie and the reader understand her bitterness. Yet they do not accept her word as applicable to all black males in all situations. Stevie acknowledges what her friend's mother said, but thinks, "I still planned to wait

and see what would happen" (Sinclair 69).

Stevie's own mother also provides commentary on her ideas about men and the gender roles and standards to which she is accustomed. She does not offer a personal judgment on men: she is merely telling her daughter how she must behave in order to avoid earning a poor reputation. She explains to Stevie:

> . . .Nobody much cares what a man does. No matter how low a man stoops, he can always get up, brush himself off, put on clean clothes, and he's still Mr. Johnson. A woman has to consider her reputation. . .It is still a man's world and don't you forget it. I'm telling you this because I want you to be somebody....(Sinclair 93)

For a woman living in the 1960's, the idea of the "man's world" is a fact. Mrs. Stevenson is not complaining about male dominance. In fact, she enforces once-traditional gender roles in the home--Stevie complains about having to wash dishes because her mother will not allow her brothers to do the chore. Stevie's father tends to drink slightly too much alcohol, and his moods and needs rule the household; however, no abuse is involved and none of the characters (including the narrator, Stevie) have many complaints to lodge against him. He has a role in the work and in the life of the central character, but he is simply not one of the areas of concentration of the novel. The author focuses far more intensely on Stevie's involvement in political rhythms and self-analysis than on her interactions with particular males. The work makes no statement about the nature of the black

male; it just describes (not criticizes) the way males and females operated in society during the years prior to and including 1965-1970.

Another example of a novel which does not get involved in black male characterization is Dori Sanders' first work, Clover, published in 1990. The book is about a young black girl's relationship with her white stepmother; black males are a minuscule part of the plot. There are several examples of works in this category from before the 1990's, as well. One is "Alice," Paulette Childress White's tale of a long-standing relationship between two women; another is Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," about a mother and her two daughters; still another is Gayl Jones' "Asylum," describing a black woman being treated by doctors who are convinced she is crazy while she believes in her heart that she is sane. African-American women's literature over the decades has included many works that do not concentrate on the black male and issues surrounding him. This approach is used consistently over time; meaning, writing that did not highlight black male characters is not new in the 1990's. Authors have not been completely absorbed in or obsessed with black males; they are interested in a wide range of issues, only some of which are linked to black men.

There is no question that, in many of the pieces that deal with black male characters, the authors show that black men are important in the lives of black women and in the

community as a whole. The authors show, often through their black female characters, that men are wanted and needed in relationships and families. The trend in several works indicates that the ideal situation is not one in which men are not included or are completely different from the black male characters described in terms of personality or experience or upbringing; instead, the ultimate is when the black male makes an effort to accommodate and respect the needs and feelings of others. He adjusts to meet the shifting in black female society.

Regardless of this ideal, however, the reader understands from numerous works that black women need black men. Sometimes the need is negative; Toni Morrison gives two examples of women who need black men because they need to hate them: Eva (Sula) and Pauline Breedlove (The Bluest Eye). When Eva, Sula's grandmother, encounters her ex-lover BoyBoy, she thinks:

> Knowing that she would hate him long and well filled her with pleasant anticipation, like when you know you are going to fall in love with someone and you wait for the happy signs. Hating BoyBoy, she could get on with it, and have the safety, the thrill, the consistency of that hatred as long as she wanted or needed it to define and strengthen her or protect her from routine vulnerabilities. (Morrison, Sula 36)

In this case, Eva is unlikely to see BoyBoy again, so she is merely finding power in her anger toward him--she does not require antagonistic interaction with him to remain strong.

Pauline Breedlove, however, thrives on constant fights

with her husband. Her attachment to these battles, for the sense of purpose and self-image they provide her, has been described earlier. It is being mentioned here because it shows a particularly unhealthy symbiosis- but a mutual need nonetheless.

Numerous works, even those which include negative descriptions of black males, include overwhelmingly positive statements about the same. Powerful and impassioned passages show the way in which female characters think of the black men, or the manner in which black males can add vibrancy and flavor to life. Cataloging some examples of such passages will allow the readers to feel for themselves what the author's words evoke; few readers could read the following examples and believe that their authors are "male-bashing" in their works.

In Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Pauline Breedlove describes her feelings after making love with Cholly:

> I begin to feel those little bits of color floating up into me--deep in me. That streak of green from the june-bug light, the purple from the berries trickling along my thighs, Mama's lemonade yellow runs sweet in me. Then I feel like I'm laughing between my legs, and the laughing gets all mixed up with the colors. . .And it be rainbow all inside. And it lasts and lasts and lasts. I want to thank him, but don't know how, so I pat him like you would a baby. (Morrison, Bluest Eye 103)

Cholly's color and vitality attracted Pauline to him initially, and she never forgets the way she felt when their relationship was happy, before the fights and nagging became the household routine they accepted. Even as Pauline is

establishing herself as a martyr whose eyes are locked on Jesus, she thinks "Only sometimes I miss that rainbow" (Morrison, Bluest Eye 104). Cholly's effect on her was profound, partially because he allowed her to feel pretty and attractive and sensual. The gift of that experience is unforgettable for Pauline, and the only person who could ever have offered it to her was a black male like Cholly.

Toni Morrison's novel Jazz describes a marriage, an affair, a death, and a renewal of the marriage. The state of the relationship which is finally achieved is a tribute to the idea that men and women do need each other and can support each other in life, rather than tear each other down. The maturity of the involvement between Joe and Violet in Jazz contrasts with the young love described in The Bluest Eye. It serves to awaken faith in the ability of men and women to forgive, change, and create a fresh relationship from a decayed one. As far as the black male characterization is concerned, the conclusion of Jazz shows confidence in the ability of a black male like Joe, after having jeopardized the vows he made to his wife, but to ultimately grow as a person and learn to make his commitment to Violet meaningful.

Toward the end of the work, Morrison embellishes the couple's relationship by painting it with tender, wistful words spoken by a narrator observing Joe and Violet's interaction:

> I envy them their public love. I myself have known it in secret and longed, aw longed to show

> it--to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer--that's the kick. (Morrison, Jazz 229)

This passage shows not that Joe and Violet have survived all of their mistakes and the hurt they caused each other, and now enjoy an easy intimacy both gentle and passionate. Equally significant is the narrator's tone of wishful reverence in describing the couple; the narrator wants what Joe and Violet share, and has wanted it throughout her life. The conclusion of Jazz states clearly that when men and women are close, the beauty of their relationship surpasses that of any other experience on earth. Like many black female authors, Morrison shows faith in black males by describing the beauty, security and joy that are part of a loving union between a man and a woman.

In her short story "Laurel," included in her collection titled You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down, Alice Walker describes a positive image of a grandfather from his granddaughter Sarah's perspective:

> He was simply and solemnly heroic; a man who kept with pride his family's trust and his own grief. . .The defeat that had frightened [Sarah] in the faces of black men was the defeat of black forever defined by white. But that defeat was nowhere on her grandfather's face. . .The family alone defined him, and he was not about to let them down. (Walker, "Laurel" 135)

This passage acknowledges that many black men have been affected by the racial struggle in ways that are intimidating to people like Sarah; but it shows that a black man can survive the fight proudly and with full commitment to his family. He can live for those individuals he can influence, rather than live by the attitudes imposed on him by those he cannot. This grandfather represents the way a black man may be able to feel satisfied with his accomplishments, even if they amount to little on a white scale, and without feeling sorry for himself or so bad about himself that he must hurt those closest to him to assuage his own shame. Walker introduces another admirable grandfather in The Third Life of Grange Copeland; Grange's revolution in thought and behavior provides another example of how the black man can learn to cope with difficult or humiliating situations without alienating himself from those who wish to love him.

In "Meditations on History" by Sherley Anne Williams, included in the anthology Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds, a young "negress" has been sentenced to hanging and is being detained in prison until she gives birth to the baby she is carrying. While waiting for her execution, Martha reflects on her relationship with Kaine, a lively black man who worked with her in the same field.

When Martha hears him coming, his banjo bouncing against his back, "almost of their own will, her lips were stretched wide in a grin" (Williams, "Meditations" 233). She thinks:

"His voice, high and sweet and clear as running water in a settled stream, always made her feel so good, so like dancing just for the joy of moving and all the moving would be straight to him" (Williams, "Meditations" 235). Invariably depicted in positive terms by the narrator, Kaine brings Martha only joy until they are separated by the boss's decision to relocate one of them. Kaine, like Cholly, brings color and music to Martha's world. African-American women authors often associate such qualities of vibrancy with black men. This kind of positive emphasis demonstrates why black women (both characters and authors) appreciate men both fictional and actual.

Dori Sanders' Her Own Place (1993) includes a very positive portrayal of a black male character, in sharp contrast to its description of Jeff Barnes. Fletcher Owens rents a room from Mae Lee when they are both well into middle age and the two develop an affectionate friendship. From Mae Lee's viewpoint:

> After all those years, it was nice to have a male presence in the house. It gave her a reason to dress up more often. . .She felt a sense of security with Fletcher Owens that she hadn't had with her husband. She imagined it would be really wonderful to be married to someone like Mr. Fletcher. (Sanders 211)

The author then creates suspense and suspicion by having Mr. Fletcher disappear, along with some of Mae Lee's money. Mae Lee, her friends, and the reader doubt Mr. Fletcher and fear he intentionally cheated Mae Lee. Conditioned to believe that

Mr. Fletcher would use and hurt Mae Lee, because Jeff did the same years earlier, the women warn each other about protecting themselves somewhat from men.

But Mr. Fletcher reappears, and Mae Lee remembers where she hid the money--from herself. Everyone's faith in Mr. Fletcher is restored, and this renewal extends to all men in general. At the conclusion of the novel, Mae Lee is daydreaming about the days she and Fletcher will spend together off Catfish Creek. Although the issue of Mr. Fletcher's race is never addressed, his positive depiction leads the reader to feel hopeful about black men simply because Mr. Fletcher is black. Sanders' Mr. Fletcher almost seems created to counter black male-bashing. The novel shows that black women want to share time with men, and that black men do have many good qualities to offer, especially those men who are most accepting of and confident in themselves.

A different way of developing males in a positive direction is by showing the way the men look at and think of women. The reason this improves the men's image is that it shows that the men are not completely self-absorbed by their personal struggles. They do have an interest in women, and they sometimes demonstrate a deep appreciation for the females in their lives. By expressing this aspect of masculine thought, the author allows the reader to see the males' sensitivity and suggests that when the men cause problems for the female characters and/or narrators, they may not mean it

maliciously.

Numerous male characters analyzed previously are given such reflective capabilities by their creators; among these are Franklin in Disappearing Acts, Butch in The Women of Brewster Place, and Milkman in Song of Solomon. Perhaps some of the best examples of such thoughts are in two of Toni Morrison's more recent works, Tar Baby and Jazz.

In Tar Baby, grungy runaway Son admires well-raised, cosmopolitan black girl, Jade. His feelings for her are so powerful he sometimes loses control of his actions, but his heart is so genuine that he deserves her love. The following passage describes the depth and passion of his emotions:

> Staring at a heart-red tree desperately in love with a woman he could not risk loving because he could not afford to lose her. For if he loved and lost this woman whose sleeping face was the limit his eyes could safely behold and whose wakened face threw him into confusion, he would surely lose the world. (Morrison, Tar Baby 220)

By allowing Son to have such sensitivity and reverence toward Jade, the author prevents the reader from deciding that he could ever be a wholly negative influence, regardless some of the choices he might make. A male character with beautifully articulated feelings for a woman is difficult to perceive as a weapon in an author's anti-male attack, because some of his admirable qualities have already been highlighted in a memorable manner.

Another example of black male thoughts about women appears in Jazz. In this example, Joe is expressing his

feelings about the emotional awakening he experienced in his affair with a younger woman. He acknowledges that the timing was wrong and that he had never intended to harm his wife Violet, but he needed the affair in order to revive his joy in life. About Dorcas, his lover, he says:

> I told you again that you were the reason Adam ate the apple and its core. That when he left Eden, he left a rich man. Not only did he have Eve, but he had the taste of the first apple in the world in his mouth for the rest of his life. The very first to know what it was like. To bite it, bite it down. Hear the crunch and let the red peeling break his heart.
> (Morrison, Jazz 133)

A black man who can appreciate the impact of others on his life to this degree, like Son, cannot be unable to be considerate of others and to contribute to their lives, although he may make apparent errors in judgement.

IV. CONCLUSION

Evidence gathered in this thorough analysis of a variety of African-American women's literature published over the past three decades does not support the claim that black female authors categorically write anti-male stories. Examining different styles, tones, and content of a range of novels and short stories revealed that the convenient label of "male-bashing" overlooks many of the lessons and artistic manipulations in the texts. "Male-bashing" is a blanket term which has been freely used to describe any negative characterization of a black male; in doing so, it smothers the truly significant points in the literature.

The texts did show that there is a tendency toward negative images of the black male. Many, if not most, of the sampling of black female authors included in this study described black males in an other than positive manner. Gallant, unsullied heroes were nonexistent, but flawed males made regular appearances. Irresponsibility, resistance to committment, lack of self-respect, and tendency to abuse family members occurred far more frequently in black male characters than did compassion, gentleness, and confidence. So many negative traits certainly suggest that the authors are trying to sway their readers against all black males--real and fictitious.

Analysis of the negative characterizations, however, revealed several purposes for such descriptions in the various

stories--the list does not include male-bashing. One of the reasons for negative portrayal of black men is that struggles between the genders are of concern to black women. In separating themselves from their accepted role as silent sufferers, they speak out about issues that they want to address since they have kept quiet for so many years. These issues include black men's lack of reponsibility for themselves and their obligations, their tendency toward physical and verbal abuse as a way of dealing with frustration, and several others. In their writing, the authors do not attack the males; instead, they try to articulate the reasons behind certain black male behavior patterns. This is an attempt to understand and to empathize, not to punish or defame.

In several cases, the authors describe men examining themselves and choosing to take charge of their lives in order to change their attitudes and actions. When this happens, interpersonal relationships improve and the men's levels of contentment and self-esteem rise rapidly. These stories show that a black man can control his personal life and his behavior, even if he feels humiliated by powerlessness in the workplace or society in general. Since most, if not all, black males have either experienced discrimination because of their color themselves or are close to people who have, the way black men handle their emotional reactions to racism, an attitude they are not able to control, is a pressing issue

within the structure of a black family. Therefore, black female authors analyze black men's coping skills and express which actions benefit a family and which weaken it.

In other cases, the negative image of the black male is used to illustrate the poor judgement of black women. If, in choosing men to pursue, women focus on wealth or good looks instead of character, or ignore personality traits which they know will one day cause them pain, they will certainly suffer for their mistakes. In some works, a black female character shows development of responsibility for herself and respect for her needs by making careless decisions about men and finding herself with some unsavory individuals, and then choosing men more suited to her wishes as she develops a more forceful personality; men who are described positively.

Other stories involve completely negative images of black males, but these men provide circumstances in which a woman can change from accepting the role of martyr in silence, or raising her own voice. As the development of black female self-expression was important to the authors as a group, one can understand why some negative characterizations are intended not to make a statement about the men, but about the <u>women</u>.

Finally, some authors manipulate the negative image of black males to gain support for a particular cause--a rhetorical technique, not a generalization about black men. This approach was seen rarely in the many books that comprised

this study, and not at all in novels written since the 1970's.

The negative characterization of black males in the writing of African-American women is real, because relationships between black men and women are important to the authors. Black women are not interested in lopsided interactions in which only one party speaks, however; they want to speak their piece as well. Their literature describes the way in which the women are trying to express themselves, understand the psyches of their men, and forge solid relationships on new foundations of mutual respect.

The negative portrayal of black males is real and multi-faceted--as is the rhythmic artistry, the analyses of racism, the statements about black women. The genre's complexity absolutely prevents it from accepting a simplistic label, such as anti-male. The examination of even a few works supports this statement; the study of many asserts it forcefully. Effective both artistically and educationally, the literature of African-American women offers a cultural experience and a perspective on human nature that reaches all races, all genders, all mankind.

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VI. APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH TERRY MCMILLAN JANUARY 20, 1995

TM: Hi, this is Terry. Can you just hold on a second?

CM: Yes, I can.

(pause)

TM: Sorry...

CM: Oh, that's alright!

TM: Now who are you. . .who are you calling?

CM: I'm trying to reach Terry McMillan--

TM: No, no no no no no. I mean, what organization are you from? I can't read my assistant's writing.

CM: Oh, alright. You didn't see--I sent her a letter. I'm a student at the United States Naval Academy--

TM: Oh, okay.

CM: A midshipman. . .I sent a letter--

TM: Okay. I gotcha now. I remember now.

CM: Alright. The first thing I need to ask is, do I have permission to tape record this, or would you rather I do it longhand. . .take notes.

TM: Oh, it doesn't matter.

CM: Okay. Then I'll tape record it. (pause) Thank you very much for talking to me, I know that you're really busy . . .you have like fifteen minutes, about?

TM: Yep.

CM: Alright. Did you get to see what my project is on at all? It's about African-American men in literature by African-American women. That's the focus of my paper. So I just wanted to ask a couple of questions about your ideas about that topic.

TM: About how African-American men portray women?

CM: No, how they are portrayed in literature by African-American women.

TM: Oh men--

CM: Yes--

TM: African-American men.

CM: Yes.

TM: (pause) That's what you're asking me right this minute.

CM:Yes, that's what I'm going to ask you about.

TM: Okay.

CM:. . .I've read all f your books, and I'm curious. . . In general, when you bring a man into a story, what issues does he bring with him into the story?

TM: Well, first of all, with each story that's different. I don't necessarily have an agenda, except, I think I had one in Waiting to Exhale. I wouldn't like to think that I bring a negative, preconceived agenda to my work and I don't think a lot. . .of African-American women writers do that. What we write about, or what I write about, are problems. That's basically what I write about. If there were no men in my books, there would still be problems. Among family members, siblings, girlfriends, whatever, and it just so happens that the men just bring. . . as far as gender, sexuality, a different kind of emotional suggestion, that's all, just like in real life. It's mostly about conflict, but that's not deliberately. I mean I have people in my books that are...not necessarily saints, none of the characters in my books, I don't think, are saints. But you mostly have people in your books, that populate your stories, who are in either [in] a...sense of conflict themselves or are the source of it. And the whole idea is to put them through things so they end up, at least, arriving at a different point and a different level of realization by the time the story is over. So that's sort of where I come from, and it's not as if I choose a male character and say, oh, I want him to represent a drug addict. . . I'm not trying to stereotype them. But in Waiting to Exhale I was more interested in types, and I have to admit that. In that particular book I was more concerned about the different types of situations that women have found themselves in, regardless of if they put themselves in that position or not. And where dealing with certain kinds of men makes it more difficult for them to have a really good, strong, healthy, positive relationship. And that was the whole point.

CM: Alright. Would you say there is. . . among African-American characters that you introduce, are there some common problems that they all bring in, or are they really completely

different...?

TM: Well, I mean, that's kind of a complex question in one sense but simple in another. . . I mean, I think all people who come to the table come with. . .baggage. You know, I don't care what color you are. . .everybody comes to the table with some baggage. And in a story, I make sure that I bring people to the table with baggage. Otherwise, it's boring. Otherwise, why waste my time? And it just so happens that the people I write about are black, so in some cases their issues and their baggage is a little more compounded, sometimes not. Sometimes these things can happen to people if they weren't black, sometimes not. (pause) Does that answer your question?

CM: Yes, I think so. . .I had some questions about. . .the women in your stories, and the way they handle themselves with men, and the choices they make with men. . .in your opinion, what are they after. What is attractive to them about a man, and why do they tend to get stuck in relationships where they're not very satisfied?
TM: Well, I think number one is most people in general, and women in particular, are striving for happiness. And a lot of times we make bad decisions, and a lot of times books are to illustrate that point, you know. . . who knows necessarily why? . . .I'm trying to bring in this whole idea of baggage. I mean if you're mom or dad never showed you all that much attention, okay, when you grow up there are all different kinds of ways it can manifest itself in your life. Or if you just happen to be the real needy type, you know, or if you have no respect for yourself. . .there are reasons for that. . .I don't think there is a reason or way that I could lump all women together as to why we make bad choices with men--some of us are just stupid, some of us are just hungry and desperate and crave love and we'll get it any way we can get it, sometimes we think we're making the right choices and we find out later that we didn't, you know?

CM: Yes.

TM: So I don't think there's any real prescription for this and there's definitely no recipe. If you make all the right moves, or do all the right things, or you've got all the right ingredients [there is no guarantee] that your dish is going to come out right, you know, it doesn't work like that. And that's part of the whole point. . .if we pay a little bit more attention not only to people that we are thinking about as mates, but also ourselves and our own weaknesses and strengths. . .we have a tendency to always point the finger at other people, and sometimes we need to think about ourselves. And that's the other reason why I try to choose, at least in Waiting to Exhale, four different quote unquote types of

women. I can't cover the gamut of every type of woman that there is. You know, there are women out here who are happy, in very loving and nurturing relationships; there's some really good men out here! You know? But there seems to be an incredible number of people who aren't [happy], and those are the people that I found that I was most interested in, at least interested in writing about. (pause) Does that answer your question?

CM: Yes, that does. . .I asked because it seems like you're writing about something fairly universal, that would apply to virtually any person and [his or her] experiences . . .critics would attack writers for male bashing or whatever, and act like it was something unique to African-American women's writing that the men come out looking bad and the women are in bad relationships. . .

TM: Well, sometimes...sometimes they should look bad.

CM: Yes, but sometimes I think the women come out looking kind of bad too, like if they make a bad choice it's not shown like they're a victim of circumstance--

TM: Yeah! That's my point exactly. . .I mean. I got accused of this male-bashing thing and I was, like, wait a minute now.

CM: If you can think of all the male characters you have created, would you consider any of them. . .heroes or someone that you would hold up as an example for other people to follow...?

TM: Well, I really like Franklin in Disappearing Acts, with a few exceptions. I like who he started out being, and who he ended up becoming, but how he got there was kind of tough. But what I appreciated about him was his struggle...a man who at least is involved in a struggle and is cognizant of it, I have to give him credit...they don't always necessarily go about it the right way, as do a lot of women...I would tend to say Franklin. And then there are a few little peripheral characters that come to mind...but nobody might not even remember them.

CM; Okay, that is pretty much all I have, all the questions I have. Is there anything you'd like me to know, or make sure I include or think about when I'm writing my paper?

TM: No, but good luck (laughs)!

CM: Thank you very much. I really appreciate your talking to me, and I've really enjoyed your novels, and I hope there's some more...'cause I'm all out now!

TM: I'm trying, I'm trying. And good luck to you, hon, I appreciate your call.

CM: Good luck to you, too. Thank you very much.

TM: You're welcome.

CM: Bye.

TM: Bye bye.